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## **A Critique of Wessel Bentley's Discussion Paper entitled "An understanding of Christian Marriage in the MCSA."**

By Peter Frow – Member of DEWCOM

**Introduction:** It is important to note that the paper in question is a 'Discussion Paper', and does not suggest an official position of the MCSA. This impression could be gained because Wessel's name does not appear anywhere on the paper whereas 'MCSA' does form part of the paper's title.

It cannot be doubted that the paper springs from a sincere desire on Wessel's part for advocacy concerning LGBT folk. This is to be commended.

However, what must be seriously doubted is whether, if he were alive today, John Wesley would agree to his name being appended to the Quadrilateral at least in the form in which it is used in the paper.

So before commencing with a critique of the paper, a few comments on the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Firstly, this was not a term coined by Wesley himself but was the conclusion reached by Albert Outler in the mid-twentieth Century after studying Wesley's theology.

The four 'legs' of the Quadrilateral are: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

However, these are not to be conceived of as four legs of a four-legged table, for Scripture is always viewed as paramount. Thus Scripture can be regarded as a tall central column with Tradition, Reason and Experience as three supporting buttresses. Alternately, Tradition, Reason and Experience, can be seen as a tripod standing securely on the base of Scripture.

We will show that the quadrilateral framework used in this paper differs from the *scriptura-centric* schema described by Outler

### **Detailed Critique of the paper using the Quadrilateral headings:**

#### **Scripture**

The paper makes the statement that marriage, in particular Christian marriage is not neatly defined in Scripture.

One can only marvel at the ease with which he consigns the Marriage Institution in Genesis 2.24 to a smorgasboard of eight so-called marriage 'definitions', one of which consists of raping a girl in the country and then marrying her!

Some comments here:

- The only one of the eight which ranks as a *definition* is that in Genesis 2.24. This is in fact, no mere definition, it is a *Creation Ordinance* set in place by the Creator in order to regulate the relationship between male and female and to enable them to fulfil their mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1. 27,28).
- It is not specifically Christian, nor is it Jewish as it pre-dates both the incarnation and Abraham. It is found synonymously with the creation of mankind.

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In the paper, there is no effort made to discriminate which of the 8 so-called 'definitions' *God is pleased with*. Clearly, raping a girl (who the rapist is then bound to marry) cannot be something God approves of, nevertheless, despite the culpability of the rapist, the incident must resolve itself into marriage.

The reason for including the Genesis 2. 24 marriage institution along with seven other so-called 'definitions' of marriage seems to be to dilute its force as an ordinance and introduce an uncertainty factor, so as to leverage the notion that a marriage definition may be found that includes same-sex unions.

*This would be like a man having received a commission and the necessary funds to buy a car needed for his work, returning having purchased a boat which was what he really wanted, even though it was useless for his job. His reasoning was that there was such a wide choice amongst cars that he saw no reason not to extend the choice to a boat.*

This is pure sophistry.

What should be noted however is that all of the subsequent seven variations on the marriage theme are undergirded by Item 1. as being *heterosexual in nature*.

Wessel's treatment of Jesus' endorsement of the marriage ordinance in Matthew 19 is interesting. He says, "...it is clear that Jesus is not defining marriage, but speaks about the conditions for divorce." On the contrary, while the conversation is triggered by the Pharisees' question about divorce, Jesus in his answer calls them back to God's intention for marriage both endorsing it by quoting it word for word, reinforcing it by adding the words, "Whom God has joined together let no man put asunder," and linking it to God's creation of man in His image both male and female. The paper's dismissive treatment of Jesus' words is a clear violation of a number of hermeneutic principles\* and constitutes eisegesis\*\* of a high order.(see below for elaboration.)

As this section has to do with Scripture, it is not clear what relevance the Roman definition of marriage has to do with the issue.

The suggestion that Christian Marriage which is based squarely on the original Genesis ordinance, derives its origins from Roman civil practice rather than the Bible is, if nothing else, an interesting viewpoint.

## **Tradition**

Here are some quotes from Augustine and two of the Church Fathers:

Augustine:" Marital union is good, and indeed so good it cannot be abandoned".( *De bono coniugali*.)

Tertullian: "For He bestowed His blessing on matrimony also, as an honourable estate, for the increase of the human race; as He did indeed on the whole of His creation, for wholesome and good uses." (*against Marcion*)

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St. John Chrisostom: "Say to your wife, 'Our time here is fleeting, but if we are pleasing to God, we can exchange this life for the Kingdom to come. Then we will be perfectly one both with Christ and with each other, and our pleasure will know no bounds.'"

It is clear from the above quotes that none of these Church Fathers though called to celibacy themselves were dismissive of marriage as being a bar to holiness.

Augustine's discourse on marriage (*De bono coniugali*.) aligns closely with 1 Cor 7. where celibacy is encouraged for the sake of one's calling in the Gospel, but marriage is in no way disparaged.

Hebrews 13. 4 has no mention of holiness, but is an exhortation for marriage to be held in honour and for the marriage bed to be undefiled.

What is clear regarding tradition is that from New Testament times through the age of the Patristic Fathers right down the sweep of Church history including the Reformation, the Council of Trent and until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the church has celibacy and heterosexual marriage as the only two options. With rare exceptions monogamy has been taught as the norm.

*Thus, the present move to expand the definition of marriage to include same-sex unions is in conflict with nearly two millennia of Church tradition.*

## **Reason**

Gender Binaries: This is I suppose a cool way of referring to male and female. I guess we could regard the male as a 1 and the female as a zero, but that might well be offensive to females.

The trend to classify persons in terms of their sexual orientation, particularly where such orientation is not heterosexual, has gained ground in the last fifty years. The different types and nuances have grown to an extent that is quite bewildering. The most comprehensive at the time of writing is *LGBTQQIAAP* although the letter *E* is about to be added.

Recognising that to Wesley, reason was a tool for interpreting the Bible, we must note that classification of persons according to their sexual orientation is not at all a preoccupation of Scripture: Scripture, by its silence in such matters in essence says, "So what" :

- This is irrelevant in terms of a person's eternal, intrinsic worth as being created uniquely in the image of God. For such worth is quite independent of gender, race, nationality, age, sexual orientation or any other criteria. *Most particularly, there is not a single text which speaks censorially of non-hetero orientations.*
- This is irrelevant in terms of whether God's love and grace extends to such persons, for it extends to all.
- It is irrelevant as to whether such persons have need of God's salvation, for all have need of and have access to His salvation.
- It is irrelevant as to whether such a person should pursue holiness for all should pursue holiness.

To the question posed by the paper, "Did God create more than just male and female?" we must answer, "No He did not". Medical science confirms this. With the exception or rare

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chromosomal abnormalities, every individual has either an XX (female) or an XY (male) chromosomal makeup in every cell of their body. Thus reason confirms the Biblical record.

*Marriage as "a way of life" and not necessarily "an institution for heterosexual individuals," seems to be what is undergirded by Scripture.*

This statement by Wessel is as astonishing as it is unfounded.

It is difficult to understand how such a statement can be reconciled with texts such as Genesis 2.24 "...a man ...shall be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh," or Malachi 2. 14 "...she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His. And why one? Because He was seeking Godly offspring." Or 1 Cor 7. 3 "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband." There are several others.

The Methodist service book states that, "It is the will of God that, in marriage, husband and wife should experience a life-long unity of heart, body and mind.."

Wessel seems to be contending for a type of marriage where any physical joining is non-essential and incidental to "a way of life". This is hardly likely to appeal to LGBT folk.

## **Experience**

'Experience' in Wesley's theology means that Biblical truth must become an experiential reality in the life of a believer. It is not enough to say, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," one must also be able to confess, "You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart."

The paper carries no reference to Scripture under this heading but takes its experiential cue from prevailing (mainly Western) sexual mores over against Scripture.

One gains the distinct impression that if the Creator of human sexuality and the human psyche had had the benefit of the Kinsey reports, then He might have arranged for the Bible to be written differently.

## **Concluding Comments**

### **The Wesley Quadrilateral**

As mentioned in the introduction, Outler's explanation of the Quadrilateral is that Scripture is paramount and Tradition, Reason and Experience stand in a hermeneutic and buttressing relationship to the Canon. Although the paper uses the same headings, Scripture is not central and is in fact treated dismissively.

*Thus the evaluative framework employed in the paper would be more correctly referred to as, "The Wessel Quadrilateral"*

### **Marriage as Covenant**

In Scripture, God initiates all the key covenants, including the covenant of marriage.

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There is no text within the entire canon which gives even the remotest hint that a covenant between same-sex partners has been initiated or would be endorsed or blessed by God, and there are many texts which indicate precisely the opposite.

*As Jesus words, "whom God has joined together let no man put asunder." are spoken in the context of heterosexual marriage, one could have no confidence that God would fulfill any joining function in the case of a same-sex union.*

## **Marriage as sacrament**

*A sacrament is an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace.*

There is a spiritual dimension to marriage: It is both physical *and* spiritual. The physical is a sign of the spiritual and the spiritual is manifested in the physical. Thus it is quite properly considered a sacrament and the Catholic Church has always recognised it as such.

It is sacramental in three distinct ways:

- As the man and woman are joined together and become 'one-flesh,' so it is God who endorses and is operative in such joining.
- The intimacy between a man and his wife is illustrative of the relationship between Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride, which relationship consequently serves as a pattern for human marriage.
- The intimate and fruitful relationship between a man and his wife where a third person is conceived and proceeds from the love union, most nearly portrays the very image of the Triune God.

*Any departure from the one-flesh joining of a man and woman within marriage inevitably distorts or destroys the integrity of the sacrament*

## **The difference between this issue and other controversial issues**

With issues such as violence, slavery, women in ministry etc., there are nuances, facets and inner tensions in Scripture which form grounds for dialogue.

In this issue there are no such tensions: Scripture speaks unequivocally, emphatically and with one voice on the matter.

Consider the following with reference to the Hermeneutic Principles below:

- There is a trajectory which overarches the entire canon concerning marriage which is one-flesh heterosexual in its essence. This trajectory begins in Genesis with the institution of marriage.
- God as a preface to creating Woman, declares that He will make a helper *suitable* for Man
- Because Woman was taken out of Man, the One-flesh union between a man and woman within the Covenant of marriage is no mere union but is in fact a *re*-union.

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- The uniqueness and sanctity of marriage is buttressed by the Holiness Code in the Torah.
- The strictures against adultery in the Decalogue and throughout Scripture underscore the sanctity of marriage.
- Song of Songs which many Rabbis consider the 'Holy of Holies' in Scripture, while it refers to the Lover and the Beloved rather than husband and wife, yet makes clear that sexual intimacy is to be heterosexual in nature.
- The Old Testament closes with the book of Malachi with the exhortation regarding the covenant of marriage that it is both physical and spiritual and ordained for the purpose of raising godly offspring.
- The New Testament commences with the production of two such godly offspring in the persons of John the Baptist and Jesus.
- Jesus ministry commences by His gracing the wedding in Cana with His presence where He makes a significant contribution to the festivities.
- Jesus reiterates the marriage institution in the Gospels, reinforces it with the words, "Whom God has joined together let no man put asunder."
- The Apostle Paul reiterates the marriage institution in the Epistle to the Ephesians and interprets it as being akin to the relationship between Jesus and the Church.
- The Canon closes in Revelation with the consummation at the Marriage Supper of The Lamb
- The concept of heterosexual marriage is pervasive throughout the canon such that if one were to remove all direct and indirect references to such marriages from the Bible, one would be left with a very slender volume. Whereas if one were to remove any reference to same-sex marriage, the Canon would remain precisely as it is because there is no such text.
- All references to homosexual acts in Scripture view these in a strongly negative light.

### **Conclusion:**

The paper concludes with the proposal that the MCSA commit to a definition of marriage which affirms it as:

1. A committed relationship between people, who pledge themselves to love, serve and to be faithful to one another.
2. A way of life that emphasises God's gift of love within the family context
3. A divine blessing of human intentions of commitment, loyalty and love.

Well this is so wonderfully warm, fuzzy and inclusive that it would embrace polygamy, same-sex unions, 'throuples' and various LGBT+ combinations with or without sex.

It could even apply quite nicely to a Seniors Bowling Club.

It is about as undefined a definition of marriage as could be wished for.

One thing is for certain: it is not remotely in accord with the Biblical definition, purpose and concept of marriage.

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Accordingly it is not surprising that the conclusions arrived at are so unconvincing, for Wessel has set himself an impossible task, namely to find in Scripture grounds for marriage that is other than "one-flesh heterosexual."

This simply can't be done.

If one wishes to redefine marriage in different terms, then one must part company with the Bible and be quite open about doing so.

If then, after reading a passage of Scripture in a church service one adds the words, "This is the Word of God" it will necessarily have a hollow ring.

What is at stake here is not simply a particular view of marriage, but a particular conviction about the authority of Scripture.

Nevertheless, as mentioned in the Introduction, it is clear that the paper is the fruit of a genuine concern for LGBT folk on Wessel's part.

This begs the question as to how there can be such divergence with the Word of God which we take to be inspired by the God of love.

The answer is that increasingly, conventional wisdom on these matters rests on two implied premises one of which is true while the other is false:

Premise no. 1.

*"We may be different from all you goody-two-shoes heterosexuals but we are just as valuable."* 100% true: this has overwhelming support from Scripture.

Premise No. 2.

*"Because I have no choice in my sexual orientation, this confers on me the right to express such orientation in corresponding sexual activity."* 100% false: this has no support from Scripture whatever. This is so whether a person's sexual orientation is heterosexual or not.

The trouble is that these two premises are usually presented in one bundle, so that to deny the second, one is held to deny the first, while to affirm the first, one is reckoned bound to affirm the second or be considered homophobic and judgmental.

Well, if you have managed to read this far, please know my prayer is that this critique may be read as a companion to Wessel's paper as an aid to constructive discussion on this most crucial of subjects.



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**\*Hermeneutics**

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Hermeneutics – The discipline of interpreting Scripture correctly – at an academic level, is a large subject. Nevertheless, Hermeneutics 101 would include the following principles:

- Jesus Christ is the over-arching interpretive 'master key' which unlocks the whole of Scripture.
- Scripture is its own interpreter: one text will expand upon or give insight into another.
- The New Testament interprets the Old.
- The Epistles interpret the Gospels.
- The systematic and didactic Epistles such as Romans, Galatians and Ephesians interpret the historic and incidental.
- The universal interprets the local and cultural.
- The clear interprets the obscure.
- There is an unfolding (or progressive) revelation evidenced in Scripture such that our understanding of God and his purposes both creative and redemptive become clearer and fuller as they are revealed "line upon line and precept upon precept."
- The text must be understood within the context of the book and the literary genre in which it occurs.
- The text must be understood within the sweep and thrust of the entire Bible.
- The context of the writer must be taken into account.
- The purpose of the writer must be taken into account.
- Taking due account of the above principles, unless there is compelling Scriptural evidence to the contrary, the plain meaning of the text is the true meaning.
- While we take note of the historical context of the text, in applying it to our current context, we yet allow Scripture to be the yardstick for what is pleasing and acceptable to God. We do not allow our context to be the yardstick for what is acceptable in Scripture.

*Within its brief compass, the paper manages to violate many if not most of these principles.*

### **\*\*Eisegesis versus Exegesis**

*Exegesis* (literally meaning "to lead out of.") is the exposition of a text based on a careful, objective analysis, respecting its grammar, syntax, and setting.

*Eisegesis*, (literally meaning "to lead into,") is the interpretation of a passage based on a subjective, non-analytical reading. Accordingly, eisegesis means that the interpreter injects his own ideas into the text, making it mean whatever he wants.

Eisegesis easily lends itself to error, as the would-be interpreter attempts to align the text with his own preconceived notions. Exegesis allows us to agree with the Bible; eisegesis seeks to force the Bible to agree with us.

*Because the desired conclusion of the paper is to provide Biblical grounds for extending the concept of marriage to include same-sex partners it has a pronounced eisegetic spin throughout.*