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# An understanding of Christian marriage in the MCSA

W. Bentley

## Preamble

The concept of marriage in civil society is no longer defined by the traditional Christian understanding. The traditional Christian understanding of marriage defines it as a divine union created between one man and one woman, and that this context is the ideal for family life. In South Africa alone, the legal understanding of marriage is outlined in three separate acts, namely:

- Marriage Act (The marriage of one man and one woman);
- Civil unions Act (The union of two individuals, irrespective of gender of sexual orientation) and
- Customary marriages Act (The union of persons as defined by cultural customs).

This is not to mention the definitions of marriage as held by the other member States which form part of the MCSA Connexion. The question in the MCSA, in the context of diverse understanding of marriage is: What does the MCSA believe marriage to be? How does the MCSA define marriage? In order to answer these questions, this document uses the Wesleyan quadrilateral as a guide.

## Scripture:

The 1975 "The Methodist Service Book" starts its declaration on marriage by claiming the following:

According to the teaching of Christ, marriage is the life-long union in body, mind and spirit, of one man and one woman. It is his will that in marriage the love of man and woman should be fulfilled in the wholeness of their life together, in mutual companionship, helpfulness and care. By the help of God this love grows and deepens with the years. Such marriage is the foundation of true family life, and, when blessed with the gift of children, is God's chosen way for the continuance of mankind [sic.] and the bringing up of children in security and trust.<sup>1</sup>

The statement "According to the teaching of Christ..." has been omitted in the 1999 "The Methodist Worship Book" when it states:

It is the will of God that, in marriage, husband and wife should experience a life-long unity of heart, body and mind; comfort and companionship; enrichment and encouragement; tenderness and trust. It is the will of God that marriage should be

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<sup>1</sup> Methodist Conference Office, *The Methodist Service Book*, E4.

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honoured as a way of life, in which we may know the security of love and care, and grow towards maturity. Through such marriage, children may be nurtured, family life strengthened, and human society enriched.<sup>2</sup>

This omission takes cognisance of the fact that marriage, Christian marriage to be more precise is not neatly defined in Scripture. The only place where Jesus gives any instruction on marriage is in Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:4-12 (parallel in Mark 10:7-9), where it is clear that Jesus is not defining marriage, but speaks about the conditions for divorce. The teaching of marriage which Jesus refers to was not new, but was a citation of one of the forms of marriage as prescribed by Jewish law, more specifically, as found in Genesis 2:24.

If one were to ask what the Bible teaches on marriage, one will find that there are several definitions of marriage, most of which will be frowned upon by current Christian traditions.

These include:

1. The union between one man and one woman, for example the depiction given in Genesis 2:24;
2. One man with several wives and concubines, for example, Abraham, King David and, arguably the best known example, King Solomon with his 'seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines' (1 Kings 11:3);
3. One man with wife and wife's property (slaves) (Genesis 16);
4. Man with several wives (Genesis 4:19);
5. Levirate marriage: Marriage of a man to his deceased brother's wife (Genesis 38:6-10);
6. Rapist's union with his victim (Deuteronomy 22:28-29);
7. Male soldier and female prisoner of war (Numbers 31:1-18; Deuteronomy 21:11-14) and
8. Male slave and female slave (Exodus 21:4)

The argument against these forms of marriage, except for the first, is that these were forms of marriage practiced during the Old Testament and that the New Testament seems to recognize only the union between one man and one woman. What needs to be noted is that the New Testament is more explicit about the *nature* of marriage than its *composition*. Although there is very little to no proof that either Jesus or Paul were married, their (and other New Testament authors') expressions clearly indicate that marriage is:

1. A legitimate state of relationship between people;
2. Requires faithfulness (1 Timothy 3:12);
3. Is holy (Hebrews 13:4)
4. A partnership with mutual responsibilities and care (1 Corinthians 7:3-9, Ephesians 5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19).

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<sup>2</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, 369.

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The question can be asked whether these values could be upheld in all of the marriage definitions as described in the Old Testament?

Marriage between one man and one woman was certainly the status quo in the Roman Empire. Marriage, according to Roman law, permitted a man to have only one spouse at a given time, with the sole purpose of producing "legitimate children"; citizens producing new citizens of the Empire.<sup>3</sup> Logic dictates that as Christianity spread through the Roman Empire, the predominant definition of marriage of being the relational state between one man and one woman was gained from Roman law and was not the civil conversion to a teaching held by the Christian church. The other seven Old Testament definitions were neither recognized nor affirmed by the Empire, and therefore became increasingly rare in practice.

### Tradition:

The early Church fathers (see e.g. Augustine of Hippo, Tertullian, John Chryostom) held celibacy as the preferred state for any Christian, most of who reflected on 1 Corinthians 7:1 and Hebrews 13:4 as indications that the way of holiness was detached from human desire (specifically sexual desire), which found expression most of all in the context of marriage. Augustine, in particular, was convinced that sexual desire was indicative of the Fallen state of humankind. Although sex in marriage was not considered a sin, it pointed to humanity's fallenness. The only way to remain pure, was to remove oneself from the lure of sexual desire, and by default, the path that gave context for the expression for sexual desire, was marriage.

Marriage, during the first millennium was a formal arrangement between two people – a consented state of relational commitment made between two parties. It was only at the Council of Trent (1563) that the Church required the presence of a priest and two witnesses to solemnize the marriage.

The Roman Catholic Church at the time, held that marriage served two purposes: for the benefit of the parties involved, and to have children. Entering marriage without having the intention of fulfilling either of these purposes, gave grounds for such marriage to be annulled. The Protestant movement, on the other hand, did not place such a great emphasis on marriage being for the purpose of producing children, and whilst affirming that marriage should be the context for the expression of sexual desire, understood sexual intercourse as neither sinful nor as an expression of the human fallen state. This said, marriage has not always been about love, lust and desire. During Medieval times, peaking in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many (if not most) marriages in Western Europe were arranged for political and monetary positioning.

Only in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, do we find a move towards intimacy (not desire) serving as the basis for people committing to the bonds of marriage.

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<sup>3</sup> Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*.

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With this historical understanding of marriage, the Methodist tradition has generally maintained an understanding of marriage as:

1. A relational commitment between one man and one woman;
2. Affirmed the Biblical justification for this union;
3. Believed that marriage is a life-long union;
4. God participates in marriage by being the source of love and service between married couples;
5. Ideally, a committed and healthy marriage relationship is the context for the raising of children.

### Reason:

Christian marriage has traditionally been understood within the parameters of gender binaries, classifying human relationships and sexuality within heteronormative terms. Although it may be maintained that the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 speak the language endorsing gender binary roles, these arguments do not sufficiently speak to the diversity of sexual identities that have been proven to exist (See studies by Kinsey and the Kinsey Institute<sup>4</sup>).

Then it should also be said that marriage is not just about sex. It could be argued that the institution of marriage, whether Biblical, Roman-historical, Christian or secular is not exclusively concerned with sex and sexuality. This would be a very narrow understanding of marriage (and sexuality) and it would not take much to return to Augustinian (and early Pauline) relegation of marriage to the space for venting personal sexual frustrations. Marriage is about what people are able to offer one another, by divine covenant, by committing themselves to one another to serve in a relationship of commitment, support, affection, intimacy, belonging and worship.

If this were to be the understanding of Christian marriage, then how does the church respond to those who psychologically, physically and/or biologically fall outside the traditional heteronormative definitions of what it means to be "male and female". Did God create more than just "male" and "female"? Would it be reasonable to suggest that God is less interested in the marriage partners ability to perform heterosexual intercourse than the nature and qualities of a marriage between people who commit themselves to the ideals of commitment, love and support? This certainly seems to be the suggestion in "The Methodist Worship Book" liturgy, stating "It is the will of God that marriage should be honoured as a way of life, in which we may know the security of love and care, and grow towards maturity."

Marriage as "a way of life" and not necessarily "an institution for heterosexual individuals", seems to be what is undergirded in Scripture. Morally and ethically, it is also far superior to the definitions of marriage espoused by the early Church Fathers, Medieval arranged

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<sup>4</sup> Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*; Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*; "Prevalance of Homosexuality Study."

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marriages, or the purpose of childbearing as taught by the Catholic Church. Furthermore, it carries a divine dimension, absent from the functional definition promoted by the Roman Empire.

Can the church offer a definition of marriage in a context where the lines defining human sexualities is becoming less pronounced as what gender binaries would like to suggest?

### Experience:

In light of the question of human sexuality, it is important for the MCSA to take seriously what it understands marriage to be. The MCSA has debated same-sex relationships for almost two decades, and whilst committing to walking together, holding varied perspectives on the debate, the Church has maintained the status quo of marriage and who is allowed to share in this covenant.

The MCSA has become stuck on only the discussion on human sexuality. It has not even ventured into how it approaches customary marriages. If two people (in this case, a man and a woman) choose rather to enter into a civil union, or partake in a customary marriage, as permitted by law, will the church refuse to acknowledge the validity of these relationships, even if they, in the Name of God espouse the principles of love, commitment and care?

Is the MCSA stuck in a Roman-civil, Augustinian frame of mind when it relates to marriage?

### Proposal:

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 emphasizes God's gift of love within the family context;
3. A divine blessing of human intentions of commitment, loyalty and love.

Furthermore, the MCSA is to consider the limitations in which ministers can preside over marriages that are legally recognized under the marriage acts of the respective countries that form part of the MCSA.

Lastly, to draw distinctions between the MCSA ministers' role as Presbyters and as State Marriage Officers, hereby to allow ministers solely to act as Presbyters and not to represent the State or its definitions of marriage when presiding over a marriage service. Hereby, ministers can affirm God's gift of marriage and allow the couple to determine the legal path which they choose to follow to legally legitimize their marriage.

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