A unique bond exists between the indissolubility of marriage and its sacramentality, that is, a reciprocal, constitutive relationship. Indissolubility makes one’s grasp of the sacramental nature of Christian matrimony easier, and from the theological point of view, its sacramental nature constitutes the final grounds, although not the only grounds, for its indissolubility.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that all of the above points of view resonate with the thinking of Pacific Christians in the Presbyterian Church. However the question that is in the news items lately has been the same-sex marriage question. There is a strong “No” from the Pacific community that have responded to me on this point.

I pass on the blessings from those I represent to the doctrine committee for this important task you are charged with.

Contribution 7

I. Foundation. “For... all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1.16). Jesus Christ is the one Word of God in, by and for whom humanity is constituted. He alone reveals God’s will for human life and flourishing. Consequently, marriage ought primarily to be understood christologically. The Church therefore rejects as false all efforts to ground its doctrine and ethics in sources apart from and besides this one Word of God. Such efforts threaten to turn an institution or relationship into an idol, an anti-Christ.

II. Eschatology. “... and the two will become one flesh’. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5.31–32). Like every gift from God, marriage is good and fitting – not only for individual persons and families, but also for the flourishing of human society. But its goodness is closely associated with its provisionality – with its being bound to the creation which is passing away (eg. Luke 18.29; Matthew 19.12; 22.30) – and with it, as with celibacy, bearing prophetic witness to the coming new creation. Its ultimate meaning is eschatological and so it is called to be characterised by the transforming of old markers and the reconstituting of human relationality in the light of God’s coming. The Church therefore rejects
efforts to explain the mystery of marriage solely in terms of the old creation. Furthermore, because Holy Scripture speaks of marriage in terms of Christ’s relation to the Church unbound by gender, we reject the claim that marriage’s signalling of Christ’s relationship with his bride must be gender specific.

III. Discipleship. “Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’” (Luke 9.23). Jesus Christ calls and the Holy Spirit empowers persons to leave behind all that has the appearance of certainty, and to become his disciples. This call precedes and exists uncompetitively with all other claims that may be made. God’s provision (marriage is a “gift” rather than a “right”) of marriage during this time-between-the-times is a particular vocation given to some so that they might be trained in the way of discipleship; learn how to recognise the otherness of the other (ie. as a being not under their power); be taught love of neighbour; celebrate the mystery of friendship; be schooled in embodied witness, repentance and virtue; practice the meaning of sacrifice, the risk of hospitality and the formation of community and be ready to accept the challenges of new life which love creates – the disciplines of denial and restraint that liberate human persons for sanctification. The Church therefore rejects as false all efforts to understand marriage (and all other human relationships) independently of the call to discipleship.

IV. Desire. “This is my body, which is given for you” (Luke 22.19). Marriage occasions a social context to commit oneself to being where one’s body is, to make one’s body available for the other – for better, for worse... for as long as you live” (Book of Common Order) – and for desire to mean more than meeting emotional and physical needs. While it is beyond the creature’s power to make sex spiritually or sacramentally significant (indeed, all such attempts are idolatrous), it is entirely commensurate with God’s character to do so; ie. to make good on the promise that human beings are more than material. “The moral question, at this point, ought to be how much we want our sexual activity to communicate, how much we want it to display a breadth of human possibility and a sense of the body’s capacity to heal and enlarge the life of other subjects,” says Rowan Williams. The Church therefore rejects as illegitimate all expressions of desire for other persons unbridled and undirected by commitment to the relationship in which the blessing of the other is not a foremost concern.

V. Election and covenant. “How can I give you up, Ephraim?” (Hosea 11.8). Marriage serves as an analogue to, and a reflection of the electing
love of God (however imperfect). Marriage exists because God loves Israel, in whom God also makes space for gentiles. This is God’s counter word to the fear many couples experience; namely, the threat to the security of their own marriages from the “other”. The Word of God brings persons into covenant communion with God and with each other, the character of which is holy, loving, and unbreakable. The Church therefore rejects all theological justification for divorce. That said, lest we turn God’s gracious provision into an ideology, the Church equally rejects all notions of indissolubility which smuggle in a metaphysic whereby divorce and remarriage are made authentic impossibilities. “Indeed, if one purpose of marriage is to serve as a sign of God’s love in the world... how can we reject the possibility that a second marriage after a divorce could serve as a sign of grace and redemption from the sin and brokenness of the past?” (Richard Hays).

VI. Responsible freedom. “You were called to freedom; do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Galatians 5.13). Marriage is an expression of the freedom granted to God’s human creatures and to the societies they form. So, “It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgement to give their consent”. (The Westminster Confession of Faith) Marriage, in other words, is created not by a ceremony per se but by an act of responsible freedom. Where possible, a public ceremony – wherein the “I do” confessed by the couple and heard by a public serves as both creative and performative utterance – might also represent such an act and so ought to be the norm. Still, “there are many marriages, true though incomplete, which the Church has never blessed or the State ratified” (James K. Baxter). If a couple “cannot or will not have one another in this freedom, it is far better for them not to want to have one another at all” (Karl Barth). The Church therefore rejects all pre-determined images (whether understood in terms of roles, or contractual obligations, or any other matters decided in advance) of what any particular marriage might look like as being fundamentally at odds with the loving promise of covenant freedom in God. “Gratuitous, beyond our fathom, both binding and freeing, this love re-invades us, shifts the boundaries of our be- ing.” (Micheal O’Siadhail)
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