

THE MARRIAGE SERVICE¹

Dr Sprott in his book *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland* asserts: 'It has often been said that no service is so difficult of construction as a proper marriage service'.² This is a surprising statement, for one would have thought that in view of the variations in usage down the centuries an order for the celebration of the Eucharist might be termed the most difficult to frame. Yet one can see what lies behind Dr Sprott's observation. Just prior to the publication of his book there was no uniformity with regard to the celebration of marriage in the Church of Scotland. Free prayer held sway and a fashionable marriage provided the minister with a tempting display window in which to exhibit his skill at its most fulsome and flowery. Nor did couples know for certain what vows they would be asked to take. As a result many of what were then termed 'the better classes' turned to the Scottish Episcopal Church for marriage where they could be sure of a fixed form, however crude some of its terminology may have sounded in Victorian ears. It was difficult for the founder members of this Society to frame a marriage service in a time of liturgical confusion. They rightly turned to Knox's Liturgy and the Westminster Directory for guidelines. In time they were also influenced by the liturgies of the Anglican and Catholic Apostolic Churches.

Yet one suspects that if the Church of Scotland has from time to time had to admit (as the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to devotion were recently forced to admit) that there is particular difficulty in providing a marriage service for our church, there are two reasons for this difficulty. (1) Upon which passages of Holy Scripture is the institution of marriage to be founded? (2) What is the basic, fundamental element in the rite of Christian Marriage?

The words of the Westminster Directory sum up the understanding of marriage embodied in all the forms of service provided by the Church of Scotland and by a Society like this right down to the statement on marriage prepared by the Panel on Doctrine for the last General Assembly.³ The Directory says: 'Although marriage be no sacrament, nor peculiar to the church of God, but common to mankind, and of public interest in every commonwealth; yet, because such as marry are to marry in the Lord, and have special need of instruction, direction, and exhortation, from the word of God at their entering into such a new condition, and of the blessing of God upon them therein, we judge it expedient that marriage be solem-

nized by a lawful minister of the word, that he may accordingly counsel them, and pray for a blessing upon them'.⁴

The Westminster Confession defines marriage as ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the increase of mankind and of the church with an holy seed, and for the preventing of uncleanness. It bases these three definitions upon Gen. 2; Mal. 2; and I Cor. 7.

Neither the Confession of Faith nor the Directory refers to Ephesians 5 or suggests that marriage is an image of the mystical union between Christ and His Church. Knox's Liturgy, however, in the Exhortation, speaks in somewhat sublime language about God ordaining marriage in Paradise and states that husband and wife are one flesh, signifying the mystical union between Christ and His Church.

We seem to perceive an unresolved tension here right from the start in Church of Scotland understanding of marriage. This has naturally influenced all the forms of marriage service subsequently produced.

On the one hand the marriage of Christians is held to be only a manifestation of the universal phenomenon of human marriage. In the marriage service they are not made one flesh by sacramental grace given through the rite. The marriage bond creates no ontological union between them. What they do is to take each other as husband and wife by making solemn vows, to be instructed from the Word of God and to be blessed by the minister from God. The Confession of Faith has nothing to say about grace given to the faithful in a marriage service in church and only rather grudgingly concedes that the couple receive God's blessing. It spends much time expatiating on the legal and moral aspects of marriage and divorce, supporting its declamations with an extraordinary selection of proof texts. Even Knox's Liturgy descends rather suddenly from its sublime exordium on the divine institution of marriage to plain speaking about the sheer necessity of marriage to safeguard chastity (in the traditional sense of that word, not within miles of a modern Christian understanding of its meaning). On the one hand the onus is put entirely on the bridal couple. They have to swear that there is no legal impediment. They must take each other as husband and wife by their own free consent. They must note what St. Paul counsels regarding the duties of the married state. They must pray with the congregation that their marriage will be faithful and fruitful. From Knox's Liturgy, passing through *Euchologion* right down to *Worship Now*⁵ there runs this Pelagian influence; it is up to the couple to 'make a go' of their marriage. God will help them if they obey the rules and help themselves. But nowhere – nowhere clearly, exaltedly, is it stated what God promises to do and commits Himself to be to the very end of

their lives to all who are married in His Name, in His Church and by His minister.

On the other hand there are suggestions that marriage is for the baptized Christian who is in a state of grace something categorically different from the universal phenomenon of human marriage.

Thus *Euchologion* (1905): 'We humbly beseech Thee graciously to send down Thy blessing upon Thy servant and Thy handmaid who are about to be joined together according to Thy holy institution and ordinance' . . . 'sanctify them by Thy Spirit, giving them a new frame of heart, fit for their new estate, enriching them with all grace, whereby they may perform the duties, enjoy the comforts, undergo the cares, and resist the temptations, which accompany that condition, as becometh Christians'.

The first part of this prayer might be expressing the mediaeval doctrine of marriage, viz. that by the mutual consent of husband and wife in the presence of God's priest an indissoluble union is sacramentally effected – quite apart from mutual sexual attraction, assurance through knowledge of each other by courtship that the couple are likely to consummate a marriage which will be to the glory of God. But then in the second part the prayer seems to lapse back into the other view that marriage is just the same thing for Christians as for anybody else, only they have to live it out practising the Christian virtues by faith. Or consider the BCO, 1940: 'Marriage is a holy estate, instituted by God, and hallowed by our Lord's gracious presence at the marriage in Cana of Galilee. It is commended in Holy Scripture as honourable in all, consecrated as signifying the mystical union between Christ and His Church.'⁶

As soon as 'the great mystery' detailed in Ephesians is brought into the marriage service are we not bound to pass beyond the confines of marriage seen as a Pelagian contract between two human beings, who happen to profess the Christian faith but whose marriage is fundamentally no different from that of two agnostics who are willing to take lifelong vows? At the very minimum we have to say with Thielicke that marriage rests upon a primeval order of creation and is at the same time incorporated in the order of salvation, in the sense that it has symbolical or parabolical force and is capable of representing the relation between God and His people and Christ and His Church. Also marriage exhibits a double meaning for those who stand in faith within the order of redemption. For them it has a symbolic character whereas for others it can be merely a contract, a biological phenomenon or at most a human bond. It should have been borne in mind by those in our tradition who so freely incorporated the 'mystical union' phrase into the marriage service that this word *μυστήριον* formed the basis of the Roman claim that marriage is a sacrament (the word is translated *sacramentum* in the

Vulgate), and that the language of the BCO, 1940, is at least capable at times of being interpreted to mean that the bridal couple by their vows administering the rite (or call it sacrament if you will) to each other are entering into a deeply spiritual union, possible only for those who are in Christ. It could also be taken to mean that the one flesh union destroyed as a perfect possibility by the Fall has been perfectly restored by the order of redemption and that for baptized believers, who are a new creation in Christ, by grace given in, through and after the marriage service they can live as one flesh, their union being maintained by God despite all fluctuations in human eros or fluctuations of health and fortune. There can be no doubt that amid the confusion, hearing so much in the service about lifelong partnership, young people do assure themselves somehow that their love will be enduring.

If all marriage has its foundation in the order of creation, if marriage is not wholly taken up and perfected in the order of redemption, if Ephesians 5's reference to the mystical union between Christ and his church is merely using human marriage as an analogy, not indicating the foundation of Christian marriage, then some of the more extravagant phraseology in our marriage service must be scrutinized, for it is capable of being understood in an almost sacramental sense. One thinks especially of phrases like: 'The institution of marriage which Thou hast ordained to guard, to hallow and to perfect the sacred gift of love'⁷ or

O Lord our God, How glorious is love.

How wonderful are the various aspects of love we've seen,
in the parents who brought us into this world . . .

in the family and friends who cared for us, and especially between
A . . . and B . . .

But love is your presence,

It's you we know when we know love,

It's you whose love will never let us go. . . .⁸

In the words of the Westminster Directory 'The minister shall, in the face of the congregation, pronounce them to be husband and wife, according to God's ordinance'.⁹ From the time of Knox's Liturgy our Lord's words have always been added: 'Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'.¹⁰

To what bond does this refer?

The *vinculum conjugale* has sometimes been understood as a moral bond, sometimes as a metaphysical bond. In the patristic age marriage was seen as 'life commitment' which *ought* not to be dissolved; whereas in mediaeval times it was seen as ontological union which *could* not be dissolved. The two views are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually implicit. The one implies the other.

The solemn vows taken in marriage affect the partners to the very depth of their being. To be made one flesh really means as Scripture understands 'flesh' to be united in their entire being as human persons (*vide* art. 'Flesh' in A. Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*).

But this insertion can readily suggest yet another very exalted conception of the marriage service, namely that it is the service that consummates the marriage – the minister acts in the name of Christ and the Church consummates the marriage. This from very early times has been the view of the Eastern Church, as opposed to the Roman view that marriage is consummated by the mutual consent of husband and wife given before a priest and subsequently completed by coitus.

For the Greek Church married life is a vocation requiring a particular gift or charisma from the Holy Spirit. This gift is conferred in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

To me as a working parish minister who performs many marriage services, this would seem a line of thought that we are duty bound to explore. People come expecting something to be given in the service. At present our stress is far too much on what the bridal couple are to do. If St. Thomas was right in saying that the sacraments were each given to heal different wounds left in our human nature by the Fall, even if we are not prepared to call Matrimony a sacrament in the sense that the Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are, yet surely we have to teach that while grace is one and the same, in the marriage service faith can receive for life the needed grace to fulfil the holy vocation of marriage. And in a church where all art was practically banished for a long time save that of the silversmith, all ritual except that of the beadle carrying in the Bible, we cannot but note how significant people find the simple ceremonial connected with the blessing of the rings, the declaration of marriage and the blessing of the newly-wed couple. Increasingly, families arranging a marriage are taken up with the trimmings and stage management of the ceremony. Flowers, rehearsals, music are all orders of the day. Instead of being impatient of much of this we ministers might perhaps capture this interest and channel it into simple, but meaningful use of colour, ceremonial and symbol. From all sorts of unexpected quarters anything remotely savouring of sacerdotalism is at once suspect and the charge of aping Episcopacy or veering towards Rome speedily rises to the lips of the douce, manly, commonsense Presbyterian Scot.

But we cannot hold our heads too high. It is barely 100 years since marriages were again commonly solemnized in church. It is little more than a matter of months since a wider range of marriage hymns has been available. If artificial flowers, flash bulbs, academic

hoods or trendy ties are all accepted without riot or schism, is it not time those, like the members of this Society, who are seriously concerned with the form and content of our orders of service put in a word for meaningful symbol and ceremony at marriages? The time is ripe for it. We must escape from the limp informality of the prosy modern Roman Rite and the watered down theology of the Anglican *Alternative Services Series 3: The Wedding Service*, which at times seems to make the theology of marriage take second place after popular sentiment and inexact phraseology.

It would seem to me that we should do two things.

1. We should ask ourselves if we have not something relevant and important to learn from the theology and ritual of the Orthodox Marriage Service. This service falls into two parts: The Office of Betrothal and the Office of Crowning. 'At the Betrothal service the chief ceremony is the blessing and exchange of rings; this is an outward token that the two partners join in marriage of their own free will and consent, for without free consent on both sides there can be no sacrament of Christian marriage. The second part of the service culminates in the ceremony of coronation: on the heads of the bridegroom and the bride the priest places crowns, made among the Greeks of leaves and flowers, but among the Russians of silver or gold. This, the outward and visible sign of the sacrament, signifies the special grace which the couple receive from the Holy Spirit, before they set out to found a new family or domestic church. The crowns are crowns of joy, but they are also crowns of martyrdom since every true marriage involves an immeasurable self-sacrifice on both sides. At the end of the service the newly married couple drink from the same cup of wine, which recalls the miracle at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee: this common cup is a symbol of the fact that hence forward they will share a common life together.'¹¹

2. Secondly, we have to ask ourselves how far it is ever right to conduct a marriage service with the overtones of the BCO 1940 service outwith the celebration of the Eucharist? Already we all know by experience the extreme difficulty, not to say impossibility of using the service *simpliciter* for the re-marriage of divorced persons, for 'shot gun' weddings, and where one or both of the parties is uncommitted to Christ and His Church. But is it logical, does it show realistic pastoral care to marry the faithful outwith the celebration of the Eucharist?

After all, marriage in the Reformed Church in Scotland was originally celebrated just after sermon at the Divine Service on the Lord's Day – just at the point where the Lord's Supper would have been celebrated had Calvin and Knox had their way. Presumably the newly married couple would then have sat down to Holy Communion as a seal to what is said and done in Knox's Liturgy. With

all our modern insights into the nature of the Eucharist as *Anamnesis*, as the nourishment of the Church's life to all eternity and the continual re-creation of the fellowship of the Church through the coming again and yet again of the Incarnate, Risen, Ascended and Glorified Christ in the sacrament into the midst of His people, with all this and much more in mind, surely we must ask is it not in the midst of the joy, fellowship and objectivity of the Eucharist that the baptized persons, whose lives are already hid in Christ, should be joined together as one flesh in the sacramental presence of Him who for our salvation wears our flesh for ever?

Here, not in the cocktail bar immediately afterwards, not in raucous, broad fun and laughter to follow (however justifiable much of what follows may well be), surely here in the Eucharist, all – bride and bridegroom, 'in-laws', friends and well-wishers should be united in fellowship and love, but especially in supplicating God that His grace may be poured out on those whom the Church is declaring to be one flesh, whose marriage is to be an image of the union between Christ and His Church. 'The close and ancient association of marriage with the Eucharist is a reminder that the Eucharist is both the sign and the source of Christian unity and love. It is from this source that married couples must draw if their love is to deepen and mature and attain spiritual fulness. If it is to withstand the stress and strain of life together, it must show itself a self-sacrificing love such as the love Christ showed His Church. The covenant which Christ made on our behalf with the Father and sealed with His blood is reflected in the marriage covenant. At every celebration of the Eucharist the covenant is recalled and renewed, and the faithful, associating themselves with it, are drawn into the love of Christ; for those joined in matrimony each mass is an occasion for them to renew their marriage vows.'¹²

As the Panel on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland suggests, a catena of Scripture passages seems preferable to citing one or two passages by themselves as if they seemed to set forth what the Bible says about marriage.

The fact that marriage in church implies lifelong adherence to the Church, with sustained attendance and financial support ought to be worked into the service. Much more should be said about what God promises in marriage and about the infinite riches of His grace (rather than over-stressing the eros element as in the modern Anglican rite). There should definitely be full, perhaps compulsory, preparation of the couple before the ceremony. The need for such instruction is underlined by the wisdom of a recent article by John MacQuarrie where he says:¹³ 'The idea of permanent commitment is something that contemporary society finds foreign. In his fascinating if also frightening book, *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler describes

contemporary America as the "throw-away society". Increasingly rapid change and mobility have brought increasing transience. Whereas people once held their possessions as long as possible and got as much out of them as possible, now rapidly changing fashions and the abundance of goods means that things like clothes, gadgets, automobiles have built-in obsolescence, for it is understood that they will be kept only a short time, then thrown away and replaced. But in a highly mobile society this attitude is extended to personal relationships. "We have created the disposable person, the modular man."¹⁴ Applying this notion to marriage, Toffler suggests (whether seriously or tongue in cheek, it is hard to tell) that in the future a person will normally have a series of marriage partners, each one suited to a different stage of life.⁷

For many urgent reasons, if the Church believes that in Christian marriage man and woman are made one flesh, this must be clearly and relevantly set forth in the form of the Marriage Service.

NOTES

1. Paper delivered at the Society's Day Conference, Edinburgh, October 1975.
2. P. 150.
3. Reports of the General Assembly, 1975, p. 147f.
4. The Solemnization of Marriage.
5. A Collection of Services and Prayers for Public Worship, 1972.
6. P. 154.
7. *BCO*, 1940, p. 155.
8. *Worship Now*, p. 82.
9. The Solemnization of Marriage.
10. *Euchologion*, 1905, 332.
11. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 301.
12. Vincent Ryan, 'The Roman Rite of Marriage', *Liturgical Review*, Nov. 1973, pp. 4-5.
13. John MacQuarrie, 'The Nature of the Marriage Bond', *Theology*, May 1975, pp. 232-3.
14. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, p. 97.

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