



Tatton, Judith (Jake) L. (2014) *Marriage in the reformed tradition in Scotland with particular reference to the Scottish Synod of the URC*. MTh(R) thesis.

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**Marriage in the Reformed Tradition in Scotland with Particular
Reference to the Scottish Synod of the URC**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Theology**

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**September 2013 (with revisions as of May 2014)
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Abstract

Drawing on a foundation of the history of Reformed marriage traditions and theology, as it has bearing on the Scottish Synod of the United Reformed Church, this dissertation aims to analyse the perspectives of members and clergy of the Synod on marriage, and offer a pastoral theology with which to make progress in the ongoing, topical, conversation around human sexuality. In particular, the aim is to unpack “what we mean by marriage”, how we discern God’s will and presence in our human relationships, and how the Church may better serve its members, in a world whose values at times appear somewhat at odds with those of the Church. The dissertation engages with the questions of scripture and tradition, creation ordinance and Covenant, and the ways that love and intimacy offer the potential for reconciliation with self, other and God. I will argue that marital-type relationships exist beyond the confines of the institution, as it is currently formulated, and utilise Paul Tillich’s existentialist approach to argue that the moralism of Law must be superseded by the morality of Grace, as we uphold a progressive Reformed approach to human relationships. I will propose that the United Reformed Church, in Scotland and denominationally, has a responsibility to *continue to reform*, congruent with its tradition, and respond faithfully to the fresh ways in which the Spirit is revealing the Word of God and calling of the Church, in ever developing cultural contexts, specifically with the case of marriage. In practice, the empirical research of this dissertation will show that this process of ongoing reform is already at work within the Synod, both in the changing dynamics of relationship models present in our midst, and the level of faithful conversation, reflection and discernment taking place, at all levels of the Synod. Therefore, this dissertation will propose that further work must be undertaken, in the area of Reformed pastoral theology and sexual ethics, building upon the findings presented here. I believe that it is the responsibility of the Church to formulate theology and practice that encourages its members towards finding and maintaining healthy and stable relationships, no matter their classification, that may offer glimpses of the New Kingdom, as they foster reconciliation with Self, Other and God. This will require a reanalysis of dogma, tradition and the world we live in today, and require a good deal of courage.

Introduction

This dissertation will explore the question of marriage in the Reformed tradition in Scotland, with a specific focus on the Scottish Synod of the United Reformed Church (the URC). Of particular interest are the questions: what (marital-type) relationships exist within the URC in Scotland, how does the Synod respond to these relationships, what do we mean by marriage, is our position congruent with our tradition and where do we need to update or revise our position?

It has long been my opinion that Christians tend not to talk openly, or enough, about the relationships that exist amongst us; the relationships that we have, our children have, and our grandchildren have. There have clearly been, for some considerable time, many “new” patterns of relationships in our midst, that do not fit easily into the narrow model of marrying young (as a virgin and for life), within a heterosexual, monogamous expectation. As an Ordinand for ministry within the Scottish Synod of the URC, this seems to me to pose a major problem. Amongst the congregations, families and the communities within which the Church ministers, are those who are straight, gay, bisexual, not yet sure, too old to care, divorced, married, living together and simply dating. There may well even be relationships, identities and perspectives that have not yet found names. This is the reality of our situation. This is the current culture in which the Church exists. It should therefore not be surprising that, within this context, marriage has become rather a contentious issue. My hope is that this dissertation can help elucidate the Reformed journey towards our present situation, and explore Reformed thinking that may help us into the future, while also drawing out some of the rich thoughts and experiences of members and clergy people within the Scottish Synod. From this foundation, it is my hope that further fruitful, gentle, earnest and thoughtful conversation can be facilitated within the Scottish Synod.

In the current debate around homosexuality and same-sex marriage that has ensnared so much of the global Church, it seems to me that Christians have skipped a crucial theological step by failing to ask some foundational questions: What do we mean by marriage? Why and how did we get to this position? Is our current position congruent with our tradition? Where do we need to update or revise our position? No real progress can be made by the Church, if it simply limits itself to questions of the morality of the same-sex relationships in its midst.

Rather, I believe that we must “go back to the beginning”, and enter into genuine, frank and challenging conversations about the many sorts of relationships, between people of myriad identities, who already live, worship and participate in our communities.

It is crucial to our engagement with any theology within a Reformed tradition framework that we remember one of the basic tenets of the Protestant Reformation: *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the church is always to be reformed). In his 1999 essay, “Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind,”¹ Brian Gerrish reminds us that to proclaim “*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,” must be to take on board the statement as a “habit of mind, not an empty motto.” To do otherwise would be to “reduce [a] living tradition to the narrow limits of our favourite shibboleth or checklist and cancel our pledges whenever someone says something we aren’t used to hearing.”² Therefore, continuing self-criticism, the catalyst of the Reformations, must continue, in order for the tradition to continue to call itself Reformed.

Similarly, Jürgen Moltmann urges, in his article “*Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda*”,³ that Reformed theology must be *reforming theology*, being “confessed anew in each new situation.”⁴ Reformation, he argues: “is not a onetime act to which a confessionalist could appeal and upon whose events a traditionalist could rest.” Rather, it is:

an event that keeps church and theology breathless with suspense, an event that infuses church and theology with the breath of life, a story that is constantly making history, an event that cannot be concluded in this world, a process that will come to fulfilment and to rest only in the Parousia of Christ.⁵

This is a theology of “constant turning back”; not to any idealized notion of our theological heritage, but rather to the very “future of God’s kingdom promised by the Word of God.”⁶ This future must be a future of justice, and the “call to work for justice” is, as Gerrish argues, intrinsic to the Reformed tradition.

¹ Brian Gerrish, “Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind”, in David Willis & Michael Welker (eds), *Toward a Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1999. Pp 3-20.

² *Ibid*, 15.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, “*Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda*”, in David Willis & Michael Welker (eds), *Toward a Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1999. Pp 120-135.

⁴ *Ibid*, 120.

⁵ *Ibid*, 121.

⁶ *Ibid*, 121.

Background: Congregationalism and the United Reformed Church in Scotland

The Congregationalist tradition in Scotland, from which the URC in Scotland draws much of its foundations and history, has always valued the spiritual independence and authority of each congregation. This has been in stark contrast to the early Reformation churches in Scotland, and quite intentionally so.⁷ In his 1960 study of Congregationalism in Scotland, Harry Escott points to what he identifies as an ingrained leaning in the psyche of the Scots towards:

all-embracing structure... Democratic though he be at heart, his orderliness, authority, soldierly array and discipline finds satisfaction in the Presbyterial system. His pragmatic bent of mind responds to the practical witness to itself confirmed daily by Presbyterianism.⁸

Nonetheless, Escott contends that Congregationalism has had a considerable impact on the spiritual life of Scotland since the Reformation, due, in part, to what he sees as the failure of the Church of Scotland and its offshoots to maintain a balance between authority and freedom, under the weight of ecclesiastical machinery.⁹ At the same time, Scottish Congregationalism has tended to resemble Scottish Presbyterianism quite closely, differing, sometimes considerably, from English Congregationalism in both history and ordinance.¹⁰

The Congregational churches in Scotland arose, in part, due to a collective desire for a “purer and more ardent” Christian life than was the norm in the Church of Scotland in the period before the Disruptions of the mid-nineteenth Century.¹¹ The Congregationalists were keen to find a model of church order that was as close as possible to the models they saw represented in the early church as depicted in the New Testament, which they saw as being closer to the mind of Christ and therefore more legitimate than those that had developed in more recent ecclesiological history.¹²

During the late 1700s there was a marked increase in rational-scepticism amongst the educated classes in Scotland, and this resulted in a significant growth in moderatism within

⁷ Harry Escott, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism*, The Congregational Union of Scotland, Edinburgh 1960, xiii.

⁸ *Ibid*, xiv.

⁹ *Ibid*, xiv.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 42.

¹² *Ibid*, 42.

the Scottish Church.¹³ The moderates strove to follow the contemporary intellectual development of the Scottish Enlightenment,¹⁴ moving away from the Puritanism of Scottish dogmatic theology.¹⁵ They began to favour human reason over revelation, and to replacing a doctrine of the depravity of humankind with one of its natural goodness. The old theology of morality based strictly upon scripture was being superseded with a system of natural ethics, with an emphasis on the ethical teachings of the Bible, rather than its mysteries.¹⁶

This new perspective may seem very familiar to the present-day reader, particularly one within the United Reformed Church. However, the common sense approach taken by moderatism served to considerably dampen the enthusiasms of Christian faith in Scotland.¹⁷ Moderates also tended to be rather anti-democratic, and were comfortable with the ways of clerical privilege to a level that was unpopular with a new generation whose members had been deeply influenced by the politics of the French Revolution, and were dissatisfied with the attitudes of the middle and upper-classes.¹⁸ The Church of Scotland, Escott argues, was unable to speak to the restless and unsettled psyche of the time. Neither the vagaries of moderatism, nor the eventual dogmatic concern of the seceders, were able to offer practicable answers to the great agitations of the world in the 19th century.¹⁹

In 1812 the Congregational Union was formed in Scotland.²⁰ Without any required subscription to a specific doctrinal confession, by which orthodoxy or heresy could be measured, this new, apparently loose, model of a Church Body was in stark contrast to that of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.²¹ Congregationalism became an ever popular (and evangelical) alternative to the increasingly moderate, middle class and liberal direction in which the Church of Scotland appeared to be heading. However, following the disruptions of the first half of the nineteenth century, and the end of the “Ten Year Conflict” post-1843, many congregants who had been attending Congregational churches now found that their needs could be met in the more evangelical, Presbyterian minded Free Church. This resulted

¹³ *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁴ Thomas Ahnert, “The Moral Education of Mankind: Character and Religious Moderatism in the Sermons of Hugh Blair”, in Thomas Ahner & Susan Manning (eds) *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*. Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2011. Pp 67-84.

¹⁵ Escott, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

²¹ *Ibid*, 97.

in some significant financial difficulties for those left behind in Congregational Churches.²² As MG Drummond, writing under the pseudonym “Periscope” in the Scottish Congregationalist stated in 1928:

Congregationalism [has] repeatedly suffered for some religious revelation which has later become the possession of all the churches.²³

However, the democratic character of Congregationalism, Drummond argued, made it innately adaptable to the absorption of fresh Christian revelation. Indeed, any church that was truly a church of the people never needed to fear new ideas, and was naturally open to being the voice of the Spirit.²⁴ Escott believes that Scottish Congregationalism was innately rebellious against traditional beliefs, as championed by the Haldane brothers and Dr John Morison, whose work was that of reinterpreting the old truths to the minds of the present day. Indeed, Drummond boasted that this was some of the genius of Scottish Congregationalism.²⁵

In 1932, the Annual Assembly of the Congregational Union set up a Commission to consider the question of the witness of Congregationalism in Scotland, specifically around the following areas: the function of churches as independent units within the church of Christ, the function of the union of Congregational churches in Scotland, the possibility of some development of the same, and the importance of freedom from doctrinal bondage in dealing with the problems of faith and conduct.²⁶ The resulting report affirmed the spiritual imperative of church as being constituted where “two or more are gathered” in the Name of the Lord, and holding that right spiritual life requires both obedience to the lordship of Christ and freedom from external control, in order to ensure the former.²⁷ The report stressed the crucial “receptive function” of Congregationalism, for every generation, in its role as a receptor, filter and mediator between the traditions of the Reformed tradition, the movement of the Spirit and the new culture that was emerging in Scotland. Further, the report stressed the responsibility of Congregationalists to maintain this function as part of their deeper commitment to Christian unity.²⁸

²² *Ibid*, 106.

²³ *Ibid*, 222.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 222.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 222.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 227,228.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 228.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 229.

Congregationalism in Scotland holds within its essence a deep commitment to Reformed doctrinal integrity, alongside one of progressivism and the freedom of independence that allows the church to stand up as a beacon of fresh revelation, particularly when this appears to be in conflict with tradition or legalism. When, in 2000, the Congregational Union of Scotland voted to become a part of the United Reformed Church, it was this rich and unique tradition that it brought to the UK denomination. In many ways, the union has been highly beneficial, although what is now the Scottish Synod retains a distinct personality within the URC. Similarly, the Scottish synod of the URC holds a unique position amongst other Reformed churches within Scotland. The identity and vision described by Drummond remains integral, and both the freedom and the theological rigour enjoyed by and integral to the working of the Synod offers an ideal climate for fruitful conversation around marriage, sexuality and ethics. It is therefore this psyche of adaptability and openness that makes the Scottish Synod of the URC a particularly promising backdrop, against which to unpack the Reformed tradition and its future trajectory, around the theology and practice of marriage.

The URC and “Deciding not to decide”

The process of debating and making decisions around the question of homosexuality began formally in the URC in 1994. It thus included the Scottish Churches of Christ, who had joined the URC in 1981, but not the Scottish Congregational Union, who did not join until 2000. In his 2012 thesis, Nick Brindley helpfully chronicles and analyses this process.²⁹ He describes how, in two separate English Synods, an openly gay candidate for ministry had been presented and accepted for training. However, staff at Westminster College, Cambridge, one of the URC’s three theological colleges at that time, raised questions about the appropriateness of this decision.³⁰ Since the question had not yet been debated openly, the General Assembly began a process of discernment and conversation, with the intention of reaching a definitive policy statement. Surveys were sent out, and a working group was commissioned by the 1997 Assembly. That Assembly also set out a controversial interim policy which held that, on one hand, being in a homosexual relationship should not automatically bar a person from entering the process of training for ministry while, on the other hand, no church should be forced to accept a potential minister who was in a

²⁹ <http://nicksdissertationchapters.wordpress.com/author/nickbrindley/> accessed 16.08.13. Revd Dr Nick Brindley is Minister of Potters’ Bar and Brookman’s Park URCs, and graduated from the Scottish Congregational and United Reformed Church College in 2012.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

homosexual relationship.³¹

The working group divided itself up into four sub-groups to look at four key areas: “The Nature of Biblical Authority”, “The Authority of the General Assembly and other Councils”, “Ordination and Human Sexuality” and “Wider Issues of Human Sexuality”, with care taken to represent the breadth of opinion held within the denomination whenever possible. None of the groups was able to offer clear conclusions or recommendations on the questions it tackled.³² The group tackling Biblical Authority wrestled with questions of whether the Bible was: “the story of God’s one covenant with his people under two administrations”, “a story of liberation”, “a collection of texts without any inherent unity” or “centred on the conversion and the sanctification of the individual”, yet were ultimately unable either to affirm these approaches as equal, or to resolve the conflicts between them.³³ The group tackling Councils of the Church experienced similar problems, and reported that its members had been surprised at some of the differences of emphasis on questions of authority amongst themselves.³⁴ The group tackling Ordination found themselves divided on many crucial points, to the extent that they questioned whether a definitive conclusion or recommendation was either possible or desirable for the denomination.³⁵

In response to this inconclusivity, the URC General Assembly of 1999 tabled a resolution stating that the URC:

affirms and welcomes people of homosexual orientation ... but does not believe that there is a sufficiently clear mind within the church at this time to affirm the acceptability of homosexual practice.³⁶

However, the resolution was also required to be tested, through the Churches, District Councils and Synods. If less than two-thirds of these found themselves in support of the resolution over the following year, it would not be passed. Ultimately, the resolution failed that test and was not passed.

By 2007, by which point the Congregational Union had joined the URC, a further working group had reported to the URC General Assembly that there was no apparent prospect of

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

progress on the question. In response, a commitment was adopted which registered both the deep and on-going divisions within the denomination around the question of sexuality, and the shared commitment to unity and further conversation.³⁷ This commitment allowed a more open and flexible approach to the training and ordination of those in same-sex relationships, and created space for the total freedom of conscience of individual members and congregations.

In February 2013, during the time of this dissertation being written, the URC released a statement to the national media, in response to the vote that had just passed through the House of Commons at that time, on same-sex marriage in England and Wales. In the statement, the URC acknowledged that it had not made any contribution to the government's 2012 consultation, having felt that it had "insufficient time to prepare a meaningful denominationwide response".³⁸ Emphasis was put on the hesitation to make any hasty response, and it was stated that a decision might not be made until General Assembly 2014. A Human Sexuality Task Group continues to meet, within the remit of the commitment made in 2007 to take forward fruitful and well balanced dialogue.

As of 2014, at a time when same sex marriage has been introduced in England and Wales, and is due to be introduced in Scotland by autumn, the question becomes all the more prescient for the denomination. Alan Paterson, secretary of the Synod of Scotland's Church and Society Committee, has been issued a standing invitation to attend meetings of the URC's Human Sexuality Task Group, in order to reflect the Scottish position. Paterson reported to the Task Group that the Synod of Scotland had voiced no reservations to the idea of same sex marriage, and that the Committee had declared their support for same sex marriage in Scotland to the Scottish Parliament. He urged the URC to support a permissive rather than prescriptive policy, and to be wary of calls for a "consistent theology of marriage in the URC." This position would allow a "permissive resolution on the principle of same-sex marriage, requiring no-one to act against their conscience but permitting to act by their conscience those who believe that in Christ humankind loses its division."³⁹

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ http://www.urc.org.uk/images/the_urc_and_gay_marriage.pdf accessed on 28.08.2013.

³⁹ Paper delivered to the Human Sexuality Task Group of the United Reformed Church, February 2014. *Synod of Scotland Perspective.*

However, as things stand in 2014, General Assembly of the United Reformed Church has not yet authorised any church buildings in England or Wales for the purposes of same sex marriages or civil partnerships. Although a URC minister would legally be allowed to preside at either a same sex marriage or civil partnership in a duly registered building, none, as yet, has done so. At the 2014 residential Synod of Scotland gathering, there was no discussion as to whether URC ministers in the Synod of Scotland should be permitted to or proscribed from officiating at same sex unions once the Scottish legislation becomes law this year. It is possible that this question may be addressed at the 2014 General Assembly; however, it may be that no official stance will be taken until a precedent is set by a minister officiating at a union in Scotland.

It continues to seem to me that, by focusing so narrowly on same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay ministers, rather than the broader and deeper question of human sexuality and ethical theology, the denomination is misguided. A valuable and long overdue opportunity is being missed, to remind ourselves of the trajectory of our Reformed heritage, concerning marriage and relationships. This is an issue which affects all human beings, not simply those whose relationship status has been going through the courts of parliament in recent months. I believe that, if we redirect our focus as a church, and encourage respectful and courageous conversation about these issues, as they affect us all, then we can hope to make far greater, far deeper progress, in ways that honour our tradition, our convictions and the reality of our lived lives. Of course, further work must be done around the issue of homosexuality, but it seems to me that this has served as a distraction from the more profound and significant work that needs to be done on the issue of universal human sexuality. It is my hope that this dissertation can be part of this change of focus, and encourage further fruitful conversation, not just in Scotland, but also the denomination.

Outline of dissertation structure

In order to address these questions, this dissertation will: plot the development of a Reformed theology of marriage, as it has shaped the Scottish situation (Chapter 1); present field research undertaken with ministers, leaders and members of the Scottish Synod of the URC around their own relationships and theological understandings of marriage and relationships (Chapter 2); and discuss more recent theologies of existentialism and embodiment, in particular, those of Paul Tillich and James B Nelson, alongside the socio-theological commentary of Michael

Vasey, reflecting on how these approaches may helpfully move our conversation forward (Chapter 3). Finally, I will offer, in conclusion, a proposal for the undertaking of further pastoral theology in Reformed sexual ethics.

Chapter 1 explores the views of marriage found in the thought of the key European Reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin, the Scottish Reformer John Knox, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Scottish Covenantal theologians. These ideas were formational in the development of a uniquely Scottish Reformed theology, and have shaped the way that Christians understand marriage, particularly when covenantal terminology is used. It then considers the writings of Karl Barth, recognising Barth's deep and continuing influence in Scotland, particularly on conservative Reformed theology. This would include the work of the conservative, evangelical movement of the 1990s, the Scottish Order for Christian Unity (SOCU), which was heavily involved in the evangelical conversation around sexuality: their theology of marriage is also considered. Finally, this chapter examines the views of a number of more contemporary theologians and writers from the UK and the USA, including Christopher Ash, Mark Driscoll and Steve Chalke, all of whom have had considerable influence on a younger generation of Scottish Christians.

Chapter 2 consists of field research undertaken across the Scottish Synod of the URC. Having tracked the progression of Reformed theology of marriage, as it has influenced the current situation in Scotland, it seemed important to then offer a “snap-shot” of the current situation. I hoped to gain a perspective on: what relationships exist within the Synod membership directly; what relationships exist amongst the adult children and grandchildren of Synod members; how members view marriage and relationship issues theologically; and what has led members to their positions. In order to gain an insight into as broad a spectrum of thought and experience within the Scottish Synod as possible, the following were undertaken: a two-part congregational survey with one Scottish congregation, which gathered both basic statistics on relationships existing within that congregation, and personal theological perspectives; an on-line “Survey Monkey” questionnaire, which drew data from across the Synod, including some voices of ecumenical partners and friends; and one-to-one interviews with a cross-section of ministers and church leaders, addressing questions of personal/spiritual background and theological perspectives on marriage and relationships.

In Chapter 3, this dissertation looks to the future, offering an approach drawn from the existentialist approach of Paul Tillich, the theology of embodiment formulated by James B Nelson, and the socio-theological commentary of Michael Vasey. This approach will enable us to understand marriage as a symbol; it may hold the potential to help us understand our relationship with God, but must not be turned into an idol for its own sake. Rather, the symbol of marriage (which, as I will show, must be significantly broadened to retain relevance in today's cultural context), can be something that helps Christians to bridge the estrangement we feel from Self, Other and God, leading us into self-realisation, as we grow into our integral, created natures as whole, sexual, relational beings. This self-realisation is the process of grace winning out over law or, as Tillich states, “morality” over “moralism.” It is this same grace which offers to release us from narrow, legalistic categories, such as gender roles and expectations, or exactly what constitutes “right” marriage, or indeed relationship. Just the same, it is grace which, through the power of Divine love, must compel Christians towards courageous commitment to justice and equality.

The conclusion of this dissertation will utilise further the perspective of Michael Vasey, as he argues for Christianity's innate ability to adjust and adapt to the new reality in which it exists, and bring the systematic methodologies of Tillich and Nelson back into the practical situation within which the United Reformed Church (in Scotland and denominationally) is located. It will offer a vision for an ever Reforming Church, and argue the need for further work on a Reformed pastoral theology of sexual ethics, that has relevance particularly within the unique Scottish context.

Taken as a whole, this dissertation is intended to offer a reminder of the traditions of marriage in Scotland, the track and trajectory of Reformed theology of marriage, and the ways that Reformed theology might offer to help us through a time of challenging ecclesiological and theological transition, such as the Scottish church is currently facing in the twenty-first century. Simultaneously, it seeks to engage as many voices as feasible from within the Scottish Synod, particularly those who have grown up in, and continue to minister or worship in, Scotland. Knowledge and understanding of history and scholarship can only take us so far; congregations must be encouraged to have the confidence to assert their own convictions and insights, whilst at the same time being given the opportunity to hear the voices of their fellows across the Synod. The lived experiences of each member of the Church is one of the

crucial ways that God continues to speak to us; for this reason, open and courageous conversation is vital.

Chapter 1 – Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations

A historic overview of Reformed marriage in Scotland

In order to understand the social function of marriage before the eleventh century, it is important to appreciate that women in Western Europe were regarded more or less as property. Parents and guardians would be compensated for their loss when their daughter was married, and any safeguards attached to the deal were designed to protect the rights of the family, rather than the woman herself.⁴⁰ Consent to marriage by the woman was not generally considered necessary, and the formalisation of the transaction tended to involve the transfer of goods. Amongst the lower classes, who owned very little, there may have been very little formality,⁴¹ and marriage was probably understood to have taken place from the point a couple shared a marital bed.

After the eleventh century, however, the church began to have a far greater involvement in marriage, including in the question of what exactly constituted a marriage. The Church ultimately incorporated a hybrid of Roman practices (where marriage existed from the point of mutual consent), pagan-tribal practices (where marriage existed from the point a father handed over his daughter-property for a suitable bride-price), and traditional folk practices (where marriage existed from the point of consummation). As a consequence, practices such as the “giving away of the bride” were incorporated into Christian liturgies, and sexual non-consummation became a canonically acceptable reason for annulment.⁴² Even if a marriage was secret (not taking place before witnesses); as long as it was between two people not prohibited from marrying for any other reason, the marriage would be considered fully valid.⁴³

It was common practice, before the Reformation, for marriages to be blessed at the southern porches of churches, followed by an optional mass for those with the wealth and status to allow it.⁴⁴ The validity of a marriage was not dependent on any blessing by a clergy person,

⁴⁰Charlotte Methuen, *A Perspective on the History of Marriage for the Marriage Working Group of FAOC*, unpublished 2013, 1.

⁴¹Kenneth Boyd, *Scottish Church Attitudes to Sex, Marriage and the Family: 1850-1914*, John Donald Publishers, Edinburgh 1980, 47.

⁴²*Ibid*, 47.

⁴³Methuen, *A Perspective on the History of Marriage*, 1,2.

⁴⁴Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany*. Routledge, Oxon 2007, 114-24.

but rather by the spoken consent of each partner, followed by sexual consummation.⁴⁵ Most of what would have been considered “the wedding” consisted of folk traditions such as hand fasting or the giving away of the Bride; these rituals sometimes taking place over the year or so of formal courtship.⁴⁶ The pre-Reformation Church in Scotland had allowed divorce on the grounds of adultery, non-consummation or cruelty. However, the early marriage courts, led by priests and magistrates, established narrow grounds for divorce, encouraging people to see it only as a punishment for marital fault, as rarely administered as possible.⁴⁷

At the time of the Reformation in Scotland, in the mid-sixteenth century, a series of more or less radical changes were made to the laws of marriage. The necessity of mutual consent was underlined by a new requirement for the public declaration of this consent, before clergy and the local congregation. Divorce in Scotland was to be allowed, albeit only for proven cases of adultery; in 1573, this was extended to desertion.⁴⁸ Before the Reformation a kind of legal separation known as “*divorce a mensa et thoro*” had been allowed under Scots Law, for cases where separation resulted from spousal cruelty. After the Reformation, this was replaced with the more formal “*divorce a vinculo*”, which did not recognise cruelty as a ground. However, many informal separations continued to be practised “*a mensa et thoro*”.⁴⁹

During the sixteenth century, control over sexual behaviour, both through the public celebration of marriage and through the punishment of sex out-with marriage, came to be foundational in the practice of Reformed marriage in Scotland. The Reformers were determined to tackle what they saw as having been double standards in the practice of marriage in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly concerning secret relationships and the practice of priestly celibacy.⁵⁰ They believed that celibacy was not a natural state for lustful human beings, and cited the high rate of priests living with secret (long-term) lovers and illegitimate children, having made vows of celibacy they could not honour.⁵¹

⁴⁵James A Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987, 236-38, 268, 273-75.

⁴⁶Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 22-23.

⁴⁷Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, SCM, London 2001, 79.

⁴⁸*Ibid*, 49.

⁴⁹*Ibid*, 147.

⁵⁰*Ibid*, 73-75. Also Methuen, *A Perspective on the History of Marriage*, 3.

⁵¹Not just priests, but also many other professions, required the celibacy vows of priesthood, which made the prohibition particularly hard to justify or enforce.

After 1560, the Privy Council (the highest executive authority below the Crown at this time), Scottish Parliament, General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and local Town Councils all passed Acts concerning the punishment of sexual offenders (those who committed fornication or adultery).⁵² The Privy Council Act of 1564⁵³ ordered that, for a first offence, fornicators should be fined, imprisoned, ridiculed and publicly denounced. For a second offence, fornicators should receive a longer imprisonment, and have their head shorn, before a public humiliation took place. For a third offence the fornicator should receive a larger fine, a longer prison sentence, a ducking in the foulest pool of water in their town or parish (in Edinburgh, for instance, the Nor Loch) and, finally, be sent away permanently from their town. Punishment was for both male and female alike, and special prisons were set aside just to house fornicators and adulterers. Adultery was more severely punished than sex between unmarried parties, the statutory punishment being capital. However, John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer, acknowledged in his writings that a punishment of this severity was rarely (if ever) carried out. More commonly, adulterers would be scourged through the streets, banished, and punished in a variety of other ways.⁵⁴

During the seventeenth century the church further extended its influence and control over marriage. By law, boys of fourteen and girls of twelve were free to marry without parental consent, but parental consent was often, in practice, insisted upon. Further, before permission for marriage was granted, assessed levels of biblical knowledge were required from both parties.⁵⁵

During the eighteenth century only ministers of the Established Church of Scotland (extended, following the 1711 Toleration Act, also to Episcopal Priests) were legally allowed to celebrate what was known as “regular” marriage.⁵⁶ However, many dissenters were unwilling to be married by these ministers, meaning that a significant proportion of marriages in Scotland were considered “irregular”, having been contracted by ministers who were not authorised to do so, or falling out-with the permitted or prescribed parameters in some other way. Marriage law in Scotland had become somewhat obscure and undisciplined, and many ordinary folk would have been unclear as to exactly what constituted a “regular” or an

⁵²The lines between church and civil discipline became blurred in Scotland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the same men often sitting on both Burgh Councils and Kirk Sessions.

⁵³Boyd, *Scottish Church Attitudes to Sex, Marriage and the Family*, 5.

⁵⁴*Ibid*, 5.

⁵⁵*Ibid*, 49.

⁵⁶*Ibid*, 51.

“irregular” marriage. Up to one third of all Scottish marriages in the 18th century may have been contracted “irregularly”, and many, both “regular” and “irregular”, would have been celebrated in a private house, rather than in a church in the presence of a congregation,⁵⁷ even though this had originally been an absolute requirement of the Reformed Church.

In response to this rather chaotic state of affairs, a new Marriage Act was introduced in 1834, which made it legal for priests and ministers of denominations other than the Established and Episcopal churches to solemnise a marriage. This removed the religious imperative felt by some to engage in irregular marriage, and irregular marriages once again began to be considered less respectable.⁵⁸ However, “habit and repute” (or “bidey-in”) continued to be part of the reality of many Scottish relationships; the idea being that, if a couple lived together, as though married, they would eventually be considered to be married. This was never formally enshrined in Scots Law, but was relatively common-place, often more out of economic or geographic necessity than wilful intention.⁵⁹

By the mid-nineteenth century, some members of the Scottish churches had begun to attribute sexual immorality not just to sin (which needed suppression), but also to social circumstances, and attention began to shift to the question of environmental improvement for the Scottish population.⁶⁰ However, as the official theological focus of the Church of Scotland remained close to the legalistic approach of the sixteenth century, little social or environmental theology was formulated in response to this new perspective. Increasingly, pronouncements from the church were tending to reflect a more generally middle-class perspective on morality and piety, which allowed the Church to seem confident and relevant within its social context, using language that sounded scriptural and Calvinistic, but without actually engaging in particularly deep theological reflection.⁶¹ In practice, the issues that Scots were now facing were far removed from those known at the time of Calvin and the Scottish Reformers.⁶² This gradual move towards middle-class moderation resulted in many members of the Church of Scotland attending the more evangelical Congregational churches,⁶³ and others becoming involved in the unrest that led to the Scottish Disruptions of that century.

⁵⁷*Ibid*, 51.

⁵⁸*Ibid*, 51.

⁵⁹*Ibid*, 52.

⁶⁰*Ibid*, 169.

⁶¹*Ibid*, 169.

⁶²*Ibid*, 169.

⁶³*Ibid*, 169.

Evangelicalism, which emerged in the nineteenth century in Scotland, talked a good deal about the supposed glories of its Reformed and covenanting heritage, reflecting both dissatisfaction with the moderatism of the time, and an unwillingness to look for new theological models. However, neither the secular government, nor the people of Scotland, were willing to let the rampant Calvinism of previous centuries regain its full hold on the country.⁶⁴ Perhaps, then, we can trace here the beginning of the very Modern dissonance between culture and ecclesiological and moral theology that we still experience today.

Nonetheless, the social thinking of the new Evangelicals could not entirely escape influence from the Moderates of their time, however much they sought to represent an opposition or alternative to that movement. Society could be judged neither solely by its irrationality, nor solely by its sinfulness, and the deep social problems of the nineteenth century could be solved neither through fervent preaching, nor rational reasoning. A combination of both approaches would be required, and the churches of Scotland struggled to find any adequate or congruent balance.⁶⁵

By 1858, 9% of all births in Scotland were technically illegitimate; a figure considerably higher than was the case in England, or in many other European countries.⁶⁶ In rural areas this figure was even higher. The Church in Scotland was slated in the (UK) national press, who accused it of failing to do their job and claiming that Scotland was a hypocritical country, whose puritanical theology did not match its lived out morality.⁶⁷ The dissonance between the lives of the Scottish people, and the pronouncements of her Church, were deepening.

By the early twentieth century, some concern was arising within urban Scottish presbyteries about the resurgence of “irregular marriages” (in particular those that were not religiously solemnised) in the large cities, even amongst professing Christian couples.⁶⁸ In part, it was

⁶⁴*Ibid*, 12.

⁶⁵*Ibid*, 12. Also, Johnston McKay's *The Kirk and the Kingdom, a Century of Tension in Scottish Social Theology, 1830-1929*. Chalmers Lectures for 2011, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, for an in depth analysis of the clash between those within the Church who believed its calling was political and socially active, and those who believed it should be inspirational and ecclesiological. McKay describes the development of social criticism within the Scottish Reformed churches, and reminds us of the depth of support that issues such as social justice, urban crises and engagement with society have had within our tradition for many centuries.

⁶⁶Escott, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism*, 30.

⁶⁷*Ibid*, 12.

⁶⁸*Ibid*, 159.

felt that the problem had arisen due to the inaccessibility of church weddings to ordinary people. However, the reality is likely to have been that as many couples simply saw little need to register their marriages, as actively chose not to take up religiously solemnised marriages.⁶⁹

We can see from this history that the moral climate of Reformed Scotland has continually wrestled with the apparent conflicts between its theological roots, and the prevailing secular culture. In practice, this has meant that marriage has been as influenced by the foundational theologies of Reformed thinkers as it has been by economic, political and sociological progression. Therefore, in order to understand these Reformed theologies, and the ways they have both influenced and come into conflict with the prevailing culture, we must undertake a historical survey of the theologies of marriage of the great Reformers, and further, to those that have continued that theological trajectory within a Reformed framework.

Foundational Reformed Theologies

Luther and Calvin

The traditional Reformed view of marriage assigns it three main aims: companionship and the fostering of mutual love and support between husband and wife; the procreation and nurture of children; and the protection from and containment of sexual sin.⁷⁰ Towards the beginning of his ministry, Martin Luther, the foremost instigator of the Protestant Reformation, set most highly the last of these three aims; the containment of sexual sin.⁷¹ This, in particular, reflected Luther's own observance of the widespread inability of clergy to live up to enforced vows of celibacy. In contrast, John Calvin (whose writings so influenced the Scottish Reformation and Christian legacy) privileged the first (companionship), as did, eventually, Luther, after experiencing years of happy marriage himself.⁷² This is an important observation, particularly in our own context, in which Christian conversation, all too often, tends to prioritise the primacy of procreation in defining marriage. This was clearly not the priority for the early Reformers.

⁶⁹Ibid, 159.

⁷⁰Merry E Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1993, 22.

⁷¹Ewald M Plass (ed), *What Luther Says*, Concordia 1959, Vol II, 884.

⁷²Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, 22.

The precise form of the marriage ceremony was of little importance to Luther. He argued that, theologically, a marriage existed from the point the couple decided it did, whether or not there had been a formal ceremony, for the marriage was instigated by God.⁷³ Conversely, if a man raped a woman, a marriage could not be considered to have taken place, as neither consent nor intention to marry had been present.⁷⁴

Later Reformers spoke out against the festivities that had tended to surround wedding celebrations, viewing them as times of unbridled sin and extravagance. Further, they sought to add parental consent to the requirement for marriage, and insisted that the couple should be formally joined before both a minister and a congregation, with a service in which the doctrines of marriage, as they related to Creation and the Fall, could be fully expounded, along with instruction on the proper roles of men and women in marriage.⁷⁵

The early Reformers understood sexual desire to be a foundational part of human nature. They thought that vows of celibacy were unlikely to successfully over-ride this imperative, and were keen that sexual relationships should not end up being clandestine, as so often happened with clergymen.⁷⁶ A Reformation theology of sex and marriage therefore evolved organically from the imperative to justify theologically the need for clerical marriage, as opposed to celibacy,⁷⁷ and for public as opposed to clandestine marriage. The emerging ideal of the “Protestant married household”⁷⁸ incorporated married clergymen into town citizenship, and ascribing them status as both hard working and subject to the same civic censure as all other citizens. Marriage then began to take its place at the heart of the economic, moral and social ordering that the Reformation sought to establish.⁷⁹

Martin Luther believed that marriage had been given to men and women by God in the Garden of Eden, and was the foundation for a society built on companionship and procreation. However, he also believed that lust was a result of the Fall. Neither of these apparently dissonant perspectives allowed space for celibacy; the first because celibacy went against the

⁷³LW Vol 46, 298.

⁷⁴LW Vol 38, 155.

⁷⁵Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 77,78 and Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 13-22.

⁷⁶Muriel Porter, *Sex, Marriage, and the Church*, Dove, Victoria 1996, 50.

⁷⁷*Ibid*, 77.

⁷⁸Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals, in Reformation Augsburg*, Clarendon, Oxford 1989. 17,18.

⁷⁹*Ibid*, 132.

creation ordinance for marriage, and the second because it asserted that celibacy was ultimately impossible in the face of man's fallen and sinful nature.⁸⁰ Luther drew on the prevalent Augustinian school of thought when it came to human sin. Pre-Fall, he believed that sexual activity would have been without lust (yet still wonderfully pleasurable) and exclusively for the purpose of procreation. Woman would have been under the headship of man, but her subordination would have been entirely voluntary, and her child-bearing painless. However, Luther believed that, as a direct consequence of the Fall, lust and the coercive subjugation of women had taken over from the Ideal of the hard working, happy family unit in Paradise.⁸¹

The Reformers were concerned that celibacy had come to be viewed in somewhat cultic terms, imbued with Old Testament connotations of Aaronic, priestly purity⁸² and were keen to shift the emphasis from *ritual holiness* to *holiness of life*. A new generation of married clergy emerged as one of the most immediately noticeable signs of the Reformation. These married clergy, as with all other men, were expected to exemplify the new theology of the *priesthood of all believers*; they were no longer mediators between God and humanity, but rather role-models to encourage common people into lives of holiness as part of a godly society.⁸³ To live holy lives in a godly society went beyond simply abstaining from non-marital sex. In fact, Calvin cautioned against “intemperate and unrestrained indulgence” for married couples, going as far as to state that immodest “comeliness in conjugal intercourse” was tantamount to adultery.⁸⁴ Calvin was a little more receptive to the idea of celibacy than Luther, affirming in the Institutes that celibacy was a “virtue not to be despised”, but that as a state it was to be viewed as a gift rather than an aspiration. Calvin also believed however, that the failure of celibacy led to fornication; it was far better to contain one’s urges within a marriage, understanding that the gift of celibacy was given to very few.⁸⁵

Luther was adamant that marriage could not be considered a sacrament, as it did not contain either the requisite sign or the divine promise, his two criteria for sacraments.⁸⁶ This de-

⁸⁰Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 74, quoting Luther, *Treaties on Marriage*, Works, Vol 44.

⁸¹*Ibid*, 73,74.

⁸²Porter, *Sex, Marriage, and the Church*, 86.

⁸³*Ibid*, 90, 95.

⁸⁴John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Transl. Beveridge, Henry, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, 331-332.

⁸⁵*Ibid*, 330-331, 997-998, 1011-1012.

⁸⁶LW Vol 36, 92.

sacramentalism emphasises the heightening of separation of creation and redemption in Luther's theology;⁸⁷ a combination of nominalism⁸⁸ and theology of “post-Fall” separation of humanity from natural connection with God, which Luther attributed to Augustine. This separation restrained the sacramental potential of nature, since nature was no longer able to bear or convey God's grace, and this argument was directed with particular force towards the multitude of previously considered holy items and relics that filled pre-reformation churches.⁸⁹

The same theology was also applied to the human body. This meant that the idea of sexual activity as somehow polluting the body had to be rejected, as the body could not in the first place be considered as holding any sort of iconic status, or embodying any sort of holiness. The body could only be redeemed through the grace of Christ, as he alone had transcended nature and separation from God. Marriage could not redeem the body from its sexual urges, but could merely contain them. God had ordained marriage from the point of creation, as the means of companionship and procreation within the security of the family unit, and from the point of the Fall as a means of controlling or containing the sin that resulted from the fallen emergence of lust.⁹⁰

Unlike Luther, Calvin emphasised the scriptural analogies between God's covenantal relationship with Israel and the marital relationship, focusing particularly on passages in Proverbs and Malachi.⁹¹ This became the basis for his understanding of marriage in terms of a covenant that binds husband to wife in the same way that God is bound to humanity.⁹² Calvin insisted that the covenant of marriage must be considered superior to all other human contracts, as it is ordained by and in God, and is emblematic of the core relationship between God and humanity.⁹³

⁸⁷Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 75.

⁸⁸The doctrine that abstract concepts, general terms, or universals have no independent existence, existing only as names.

⁸⁹Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 131-32.

⁹⁰Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 76.

⁹¹In particular, Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14-16.

⁹²Lect. Mal 2:14-16, Comm. Eph. 5:22; Serm. Deut. 5:18 as quoted in John Witte Jr, *John Calvin on Marriage and Family Life* at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1014729, 3. Accessed 26th September 2013.

⁹³Comm. Gen. 19:4-9; Comm. Harm. Law Ex. 22:19, Lev. 18:22, 20:13-16, Deut. 27:16; Serm. Deut. 22:13-24 as quoted in Witte, *John Calvin on Marriage and Family Life*, 3.

Whereas Luther had taught that marriage should be administered by the state, not the church, being far more a matter of the secular law than the Gospel,⁹⁴ Calvin taught that marriage was an intrinsic concern of both church and state. Whilst it was the task of the minister to *preach* the Word of God, it was the task of the magistrate to govern *according* to it, ensuring that that governance was both outwardly godly and inwardly open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁵ This meant that, while Luther had felt that the Church's predominant role in marriage was pastoral, Calvin's teachings required an actively ecclesiological involvement in even the legal and contractual aspects of a union.

Although the Reformers believed that, spiritually, men and women were created equal by God, the belief persisted that, in all other respects, women should be subordinate to men. In keeping with the Aristotelian, “classical” view of women, the Reformers taught that the subordination of women was a creation ordinance, made all the more pronounced by the sin of Eve and subsequent Fall. However, Calvin observed that many of the most commonly upheld traditions around the subordination of women had their roots more in received or popular tradition and social convention, rather than actual divine command. On this basis it might be expected that these gender roles and assumptions ought to be open to change or progression, but Calvin neither foresaw this change happening, nor took any action to catalyse it.⁹⁶

In his earlier ministry, Luther had held that women required sexual intercourse in order to stay healthy, but that female sexuality was rather dangerous, and a problematic source of temptation for young men.⁹⁷ He also suggested that, should a woman die during childbirth, men should not be too concerned, as childbirth was what women were created for.⁹⁸ However, following Luther’s years of happy marriage and fatherhood, this was another of his perspectives on gender and marriage that visibly softened. He wrote in later life;

For God has created women to be held in honour and as helpers for man and for this reason he does not wish to have such love forbidden and despised... God wills that they be valued and esteemed as women and that this be done gladly and with love...

⁹⁴R Kolb & Timothy J Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Fortress 2000, 368.

⁹⁵Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: an Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford 1993, 214,215 and Calvin, *Institutes*, 942, 1170.

⁹⁶Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 21 and Calvin, *Institutes*, 960.

⁹⁷Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 48.

⁹⁸*Ibid*, 9, quoting Martin Luther, *Sämtliche Werke*, Erlangen and Frankfurt, 1826-57, vol XX, 84.

one should take them in marriage and remain with them in conjugal love. That pleases God, but it requires skill and grace.⁹⁹

Those of us reading the works of Luther and Calvin in the twenty-first century, specifically those concerning marriage, bear the responsibility of distilling and discerning carefully. We must ask: what are the culturally accepted or assumed “norms” of our own time, and what were the norms of those times, in the societal contexts of Luther and Calvin? Once we have identified these, we must then attempt to extract the fundamental theological principals of these writings. An indication of this is found in Calvin’s own acknowledgement that not all the ways in which women were treated or thought of in his own time were divinely ordained while, at the same time, he made no particular effort to champion any changes in this respect.

Each culture and society has its own habits and, indeed, its own narrative. In our own context, in Scotland, in the early twenty-first century, the cultural context of Reformed Tradition ministry is far removed from the realities lived out by Luther and Calvin. However, I would argue that there is an underlying dissonance between what we often *presume* to be the “Reformed approach”, and the lived out reality of the relationships now viewed as being “the norm”; if not by the majority of URC members, then by their children and grandchildren. Through acknowledging some of the cultural and contextual differences, and their background and impact, I believe that it will become imperative to us to set aside certain early Reformation pronouncements on issues such as gender and inequality, sex before marriage and later Reformed commentary on sexual orientation. From this point we can then go on to discern a core theology around sex and marriage that has been fundamental to our (ever evolving) tradition, from its outset.

I would suggest that it is possible to distil the following core theology around sex and marriage from the work of Luther and Calvin: companionship and love are the greatest goods of marriage; very few (if any) are called to celibacy, so that human beings, by creation ordinance, are called to fulfilling sexual relationships with each other; sexual sin is a result of the Fall, and human beings should seek out godly relationships; these relationships can model the covenant relationship between God and God’s people.

⁹⁹ Theodore G. Tappert (ed), *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*. Fortress, Minneapolis 2007, 93, 94.

In particular, the writings of John Calvin, and those who developed his theology further, towards the Calvinism we know today, have had a profound influence on the development of Reformed theology of Scotland. However, Calvinism has also had great influence upon the Church of England. John Knox, as we shall see, bore strong influence from both Calvinism and Anglicanism, and the UK-wide Westminster Confession of faith clearly echoes the goods of marriage listed above, as we shall see.

Knox and the Westminster Confession of Faith

John Knox, along with John Douglas, John Row, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, and John Winram (the group who formulated the Scottish Confession of 1560) wrote in the First Book of Discipline that marriage was a “blessed ordinance of God”¹⁰⁰ that had been corrupted by the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in terms of practices around divorce.¹⁰¹ He was strongly against secret marriage and insisted on the wedding taking place in the church, between parties who had not yet consummated their union. Knox understood marriage very much in terms of Covenant, and expected absolute abstinence until the consummation of the marriage.¹⁰² If the couple had sex before their wedding, the father of the bride would have the right to insist that the marriage go ahead, that the dowry was paid to himself or another bodily punishment be inflicted upon the man.¹⁰³ Marriages could only take place between consenting adults; for men at least fourteen, for women at least twelve years old.¹⁰⁴

Knox argued that divorce should only be allowed in the case of proven adultery, in which case the offending party should be executed,¹⁰⁵ although he was realistic that this punishment was unlikely to be carried out. In this case (“if the civil sword foolishly spares the life of the offender”),¹⁰⁶ the church should excommunicate the offender, unless they displayed clear signs of repentance. If this genuine repentance came with a desire to be reconciled with the

¹⁰⁰John Knox, *The Ninth Head Concerning the Policy of the Church: Of Marriage*, accessed at <http://play.google.com/books/reader?id=9T89AQAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP9> on 18th September 2013, “The First Book of Discipline”, from *The Works of John Knox*, edited by David Laing; James Thin, Edinburgh 1895, Vol. 2, pp. 183-260 & “The Second Book of Discipline”, from David Calderwood’s *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, edited by Thomas Thomson; Edinburgh: Wodrow Society 1843, Vol. 3, pp. 529-55. Copyright © 1993 by Presbyterian Heritage Publications.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

church, it would not be for the church to stand in the way of God's absolution. Following this reconciliation, the offender would be permitted to remarry the person they had offended (but no one else), should that party desire marital reconciliation, and a new wedding could go ahead, as though from scratch.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, composed in 1646, made creedal the foundations of systematic Reformed theology, based on Calvinistic scholarship, and had a profound influence in Scotland.¹⁰⁷ Chapter XXIV of the Confession states that marriage should be between one man and one woman exclusively. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, the increase of mankind and the Church, and the prevention of sexual sin. Christians (specifically Reformed Protestant Christians) should only marry other (Reformed Protestant) Christians, and divorce was permitted only in cases of adultery or desertion.

The Westminster Confession was essentially Covenantal, understanding the relationship between God and human-kind as being bound for all time in the New Covenant of Christ, which had superseded the Hebraic Covenant of the Old Testament. The idea of the Covenant of Works,¹⁰⁸ built into the theology of the Westminster Confession a romanised, contractual framework of law (*lex*). Yet, since the Westminster Confession followed the foundational Reformation innovation, by giving the idea of the Covenant of Grace primacy over that of works, the focus became more on the way that God, personally inviting humankind into fellowship and relationship with Himself, required response through worship and love. This, according to the theology of Westminster, is the "covenanted correspondence of the whole universe to its creator".¹⁰⁹

The Westminster Confession taught that the conditions of the Covenant have been fulfilled in Christ, as he embodied the Covenant of Grace and, through his sacrifice, freely extends this to all humanity. Patrick Gillespie¹¹⁰ further explained this concept, explaining that the Covenant of Grace should be considered an absolute testament of grace; the things that were required of humanity in the Covenant have been performed on our behalf by Christ "by which his

¹⁰⁷ Thomas F Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1996, 125.

¹⁰⁸ See pp 29-31.

¹⁰⁹ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 136.

¹¹⁰ Patrick Gillespie, (1617–1675), was a key Scottish Covenanter, and friend of Oliver Cromwell. He dissented and was deposed from the Church of Scotland, over his objection to a treaty with King Charles.

testament and latter will be disposed and left to his people absolutely".¹¹¹ It is important to acknowledge the profound depth of grace that is described in these words, and understand this same level of grace to have been referred to in the covenant of marriage.

The development of Covenantal Theology in Scotland

Covenantal theology was profoundly influenced by key Scottish theologians, such as Samuel Rutherford and Thomas Boston, and, as has been seen, was central to the theological make-up of the Westminster Confession. It remains deeply engrained in the Scottish Reformed psyche, and has had a clear effect on how marriage is talked about in Scotland today. Covenantal theology is essentially Calvinist, emphasising the fact that God has acted for us in Christ; our human response is a kind of cooperation, creating a complementarity between the actions of God and humanity, only made possible through the "priestly nature of the human Jesus". From this foundation Thomas F Torrance argues that it was: "through union with Christ that the concern of the Reformed Kirk with human and social care in the lives of people was grounded".¹¹²

Unlike Calvin, who had focused his covenantal theology on the eternal, marital relationship between Israel and God, Samuel Rutherford¹¹³ set his theology of Covenant within a "federal" system. This made a strong distinction between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace,¹¹⁴ whilst holding both together as interdependent, under the more broadly termed "Covenant of Life". All things, including the salvation wrought by Christ, were then considered to be in accordance with two foundational premises: God's original intention, and what was accomplished by Christ, in his death and resurrection. Atonement was governed, on one hand, by the consequences of there being (as Calvin had taught, and Rutherford believed) those who were chosen for salvation (the Elect) and those who had not (the Reprobate), yet also tempered by the reality of God's eternal Covenant of Love with His people.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Testament Opened*. London, 1661 as accessed at <http://archive.org/details/arkofcope00gill> on 26th September 2013, p302.

¹¹² Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 45.

¹¹³ Samuel Rutherford, (c1600-1661), was one of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly which formulated the Westminster Confession, a prolific writer and non-conformist.

¹¹⁴ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 96.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 97.

Rutherford also spoke of a “Covenant of Redemption” and “Covenant of Reconciliation”. The Covenant of Redemption described the role of Christ, as God and man, witnessing, authoring and confirming the relationship between God and humanity.¹¹⁶ This covenant was worked out in the complex relationship between God and Christ, emphasising the saving grace of God, embodied and proclaimed through Christ, as he fulfilled the conditions previously only upheld through the legalistic outworking of the covenant of Law (the Torah). The Covenant of Reconciliation described the way in which Christ “completed his saving work in time”.¹¹⁷

Thomas Boston also made a significant contribution to the development of Covenantal Theology, in Scotland and beyond. He rejected the idea of a separate Covenant of Redemption, as being un-biblical, preferring to include it as simply being contained within the Covenant of Grace. Further, Boston rejected the idea that the Abrahamic Covenant of Works, or Covenant of Life (The Torah or Law), which he argued could not be lived up to in the first place.¹¹⁸

However, the idea of the Covenant of Works was very important for Boston. He believed that the obedience modelled by Christ, as he fulfilled the conditions of that Covenant on the part of humanity, and offered himself up as the ultimate sacrifice or our behalf, had permanently satisfied and appeased the justice and wrath of God. This meant that the Covenant of Grace was like a bargain or pact, made between God and Christ (as the second Adam), through which the salvation of the elect was promised,¹¹⁹ with Jesus standing as the surety and executor of the deal himself.¹²⁰ Seen in this light, Christ himself becomes the Covenant.¹²¹

When viewed in the light of this complex theology, the idea of understanding marriage in strictly covenantal terms becomes somewhat uncomfortable. For marriage to be truly covenantal under these terms, it would surely demand a perspective of marriage that holds some innately redemptive qualities; more than just a simple parallel or analogy to God's covenant with his people, but rather as containing sacramental properties beyond those which

¹¹⁶ Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life*, part II, ch V, pp 282-308, 355 as accessed at <http://reformedlayman.com/CovenantOfLifeOpened/THE%20COVENANT%20OF%20LIFE%20OPENED.htm> on 26th September 2013.

¹¹⁷ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 104.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 214 and *Works*, Vol 1, 333.

¹¹⁹ *Works*, Vol 8, pp396f.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pp416-26, 519-48.

¹²¹ *Works*, Vol 1, p321, Vol 8, p520.

are considered orthodox within Reformed theology. In fact, this is exactly why Luther dismissed the idea of marriage being a *sacrament*. Therefore, we must ask whether our collective memory has become dull when we use such language today for marriage; perhaps there may be other language that is better suited to describe what we mean when we talk of Christian marriage today.

Karl Barth

The theology of Karl Barth has had a profound influence on modern day Scottish theology, particularly within evangelicalism, and in the writing of those involved in the Scottish Order of Christian Unity (SOCU), of the 1990s.¹²² Barth was born in 1886, in Switzerland, and (although he rejected the term himself) has become known as the “father of neo-orthodoxy”. His theological influence can be seen clearly in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas, Jürgen Moltman and the Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance (also of the SOCU).

Karl Barth’s theology of marriage can be found predominantly in his Church Dogmatics III/4, although III/4 also draws heavily on the more anthropological III/2, within which he portrays human individuality as being formed and defined in relation to the “other”. Human beings, he states, can only be truly human when they know and are known by the other, see and are seen; looking the other in the eye and being looked in the eye.¹²³ From Barth’s perspective it is therefore impossible to be truly human, or to have one’s own individuality, without engaging in mutual relationships with other human beings.¹²⁴

Barth defined marriage as being both something that solidifies the interrelatedness of males and females, and the synergy that is created between them.¹²⁵ From this synergy then comes a voluntary, mutual, on-going exchange, that is constant, intimate, intense and requiring of a great deal of work, from both participants.¹²⁶ Understanding, self-giving and desire should be central to the relationship.¹²⁷ Marriage thus involves the:

¹²² See below, pages 35-38.

¹²³ Karl Barth, “Church Dogmatics”, in G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (eds), *Volume III/4, The Doctrine of Creation*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1961, 251.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 262-263.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 182.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 187, 203.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 219.

free, mutual and harmonious choice of love on the part of a particular man and woman [that] leads to a responsibly undertaken life-union which is lasting, complete and exclusive.¹²⁸

Barth strongly rejected the Roman Catholic emphasis on procreation,¹²⁹ linking it to the “natural mysticism” of the pagans, in their traditional, historical approach to marriage and sex.¹³⁰

Barth viewed Christian marriages as being primarily ecclesiastical and community events and institutions, even though he acknowledged that there was no biblical requirement or imperative for this.¹³¹ He held that state recognition should be required for the legal validity of a marriage.¹³² He also made a clear delineation between secular and sacred marriage and, building on this idea, firmly believed that divorce could only have a place within a secular marriage; it could only be a legal process, for a social entity, but since this was not at all the sort of marriage that a Christian entered into, divorce could never be permitted for a Christian.¹³³

Unlike the Reformers, Barth did not believe that there was an imperative for Christians to marry. Instead, he argued that we live in a messianic age, and that marriage is a specific messianic vocation, not a creation ordinance. This meant that marriage must have an innately Christological nature, in terms of the mutual love and service, forgiveness and patience that partners should model for each other.¹³⁴ Marriage, Barth believed, is a divine invitation to humanity and a call to freedom;¹³⁵ through monogamous, married, sexual relationships humankind is brought into wholeness, just as is humanity, through Christ.¹³⁶

In this way, marriage is not only Christological, but also covenantal, particularly in terms of its locatedness within the community. Barth believed that human individuality is one of the things from which the human needs to be freed, through the mutuality experienced with and

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 140.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 188-189.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 119.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 227, 228.

¹³² *Ibid*, 227.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 212.

¹³⁴ Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness*. Ashgate, Aldershot 2004, 150.

¹³⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 117.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 132, 196.

through Christ, one's spouse, and all of humanity.¹³⁷ This is God's pre-ordained covenant with us, which brings us into partnership and relationship with Him, and is characterised in our encounter with our fellow man.¹³⁸

Marriage is, therefore, according to Barth, a central expression of covenant, shown in the Hebrew Scriptures to correspond to the relationship between God and His people and, in the New Testament, to the relationship between Christ and the Christian community.¹³⁹ Therefore (he argues), marriage must be between male and female, because male and female are created as the image of the Covenant of Grace, the relationship between God and God's people and the relationship between Christ and His community, which can only be understood in terms of otherness, or "I and Thou".¹⁴⁰ This is, however, a problematic assertion. Barth fails to justify his polarisation of God and Christ as male, with humanity and community as female. It seems to me that the "otherness" of God from humanity is not adequately represented merely by the idea of the otherness of male and female. Rather, we must understand and embrace the complex overlaps of otherness and "made in God's image" that exist in the relationship between God and humanity, and Christ and the Church. From this point, the intricacies of human relationship, both in otherness and sameness, can better begin to be seen within the terms of the Covenant of Grace.

Barth took care to stress that male should not be thought to be in any way superior to female. Rather, man and woman should understand each other as fellows, who simply hold differing roles. Males should be humble about the role which they have been set, understanding themselves as "inspirers, leaders and initiators"¹⁴¹ in a relationship that is rendered meaningless if females do not follow and occupy their right place within it. Service must be understood, by both male and female, as being the primary good, and any pre-eminence of males must be clearly understood as a human imperative, and not one of God.¹⁴²

Within this context of co-existence and complementarity, sexuality becomes a part of fellowship. Sexual intimacy represents, for Barth, both the ordered and the disordered,¹⁴³

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 224, 228.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 116.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 117.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 170.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 170.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 131.

perhaps reflecting the dissonance between creation and Fall wrestled with by Luther and Calvin before him. Barth insisted that, within the married relationship, sex should have its essence solely in the freedom wrought by the Covenant of Grace. It should neither be repressed, nor viewed in isolation or abstraction, as it is an integral part of the “whole human” and must be integrated into the whole self,¹⁴⁴ and consequently into the married relationship. To view sex as having a place out-with the natural course of a married relationship is, according to Barth, a “demonic business”,¹⁴⁵ placing it out-with the Covenant, and therefore command, of God’s grace. The only proper and created context for godly, covenantal and mutually freeing sex is therefore marriage, for sex that is simply physical is both rebellious towards the Covenant and de-humanising to the wholeness of the person.

On the issue of homosexuality, Barth acknowledged that same-sex relationships could seem, at first, to manifest beauty and spirituality, even sanctity. However, he saw homosexuality as a “tragedy”, rooted in the sinful human aspiration towards sovereignty and self-sufficiency. This aspiration was a rebellion against both the command of God and the covenantal gift of freedom into humanness, through the relationship between man and woman.¹⁴⁶

We can therefore make the following observations on Barth’s approach to marriage: mutuality is the greatest good of marriage (concurring largely with the position of Luther and Calvin); sexual relationships are not essential within marriage (in this Barth disagrees with Luther and Calvin, and indeed with the Christian tradition that has seen non-consummation as grounds for annulment of marriage), but the innate sexuality of the created, human nature must be integrated somehow into the self, in order to achieve wholeness (a Jungian principle); marriage is *not* a creation ordinance, but does reflect the Covenant of Grace between God and human-kind and is therefore necessarily monogamous and lifelong, precluding the option of divorce for Christians.

¹⁴⁴ Integration and wholeness are ideas central also to Barth’s secular contemporary, psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who we shall see also influenced the work of James B Nelson, particularly around “means of knowing” and, like Barth, ideas of wholeness.

¹⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 131,132.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 166.

The Scottish Order of Christian Unity (Scottish evangelical theology in the 1990s)

The Scottish Order of Christian Unity (SOCU) was founded in 1995 “to be a Christian voice within Scotland in the area of family life, education, the media, and medial ethics”.¹⁴⁷ Explicitly evangelical, but loosely ecumenical, with a strong Church of Scotland bias, between 1995 and 2011 the Order published a number of books and booklets, and hosted public meetings and conferences. In 1997 the group published *God, Family and Sexuality*, a collection of essays edited by David Torrance, with a preface by T F Torrance, a commendation from Lady Lothian, and contributions by: David C Searle, Kevin J Vanhoozer, David W Torrance, Graham and Alison Dickson, Brigid C McEwen, Howard Taylor, Elaine Storkey, James B Walker, Denis Wrigley and Linda Stalley.

In his contribution to *God, Marriage & Sexuality*, “Marriage in the Light of Holy Scripture”, David Torrance claims to ground his methodology in the approach of the early Reformers by considering not just stand-alone passages of Scripture, but seeking to develop a holistic view of the Word, or Gospel, and the divine truths to which it points.¹⁴⁸ The Reformers, Torrance argues, regarded marriage as being both ordained and set apart by Christ. Marriage was also part of the creation ordinance, and was therefore set for all of humanity. However, as Barth had also argued, Christian marriage had been redeemed by Christ from its fallen state, and was therefore different from the marriage of non-Christians, being “in Christ”.¹⁴⁹ This differentiation should preclude Christians from marrying non-Christians.¹⁵⁰

The Reformers’ understanding of Christian marriage, according to Torrance, was patterned on God’s Covenant relationship with His people: patient, forgiving and loving.¹⁵¹ This Covenant is built on the foundation of, and sealed by and within, the Holy Spirit, while modelled also on the example of the submission of Christ in his love for humanity. Sexual sins are a breach of this Covenant, and consequently have a deep effect on one’s relationship with God.¹⁵² Further, based on the idea of Creation Ordinance, Torrance argues that marriage was created as part of God’s “loving purpose for humanity”,¹⁵³ and these very words are used in the

¹⁴⁷ <http://socu.org.uk/> as accessed 09.08.13.

¹⁴⁸ David W Torrance, “Marriage in the Light of Holy Scripture”, in David W Torrance (ed), *God, Family and Sexuality*, Handsel Press, Carberry 1997, 31.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 33.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 35.

Church of Scotland Book of Common Order today.¹⁵⁴ It is both a calling and a gift of grace; not something that can be opted out of. It is also both a part of creation, and a continuing act of creation.¹⁵⁵ Torrance goes on to list so called “sins of a high hand”: idolatry, murder, adultery and homosexuality. These, he claims, were viewed by the Reformers and the Old Testament writers, as they should still today, as being grievous sins against the Covenant, the penalty for which is death¹⁵⁶ (although he reminds us of the possibility of God’s forgiveness, through Christ).

Marriage, argues Torrance, is a “total and all-embracing fellowship of love, for life”¹⁵⁷ and, because of this, is necessarily monogamous. He speaks out strongly against the practice of polygamy,¹⁵⁸ yet, given his heavily scriptural argument, makes nothing of the fact that, in a number of the scriptural passages to which he refers (Gen 2:18-25, 1Kings 11:3, Hosea 1:1-3, Malachi 2:13-16), God does not appear to be against these practices. For Torrance, citing Karl Barth:

it is the free electing grace of God, manifested in the fulfilment of the covenant of Jesus Christ, which alone gives compelling and ultimate force to the requirement of monogamy.¹⁵⁹

Torrance continues in a Barthian framework to prohibit sex before or out-with marriage, arguing that only marriage enables men and women to truly “become” men and women respectively, through relationship with each other.¹⁶⁰ The *complementarity* of comprehensive difference is what allows the becoming of “one flesh”.¹⁶¹

This complementarity cannot be extended to homosexual relationships. In fact, Torrance argues that these are expressly forbidden by Scripture¹⁶² and are contrary to God’s created order. The created, sexual differences between men and women, and the resultant complementarity, are: God-given, are vital for “true human fellowship, wholeness and fulfilment in marriage as God intended” and cannot morally be set aside, as Torrance believes

¹⁵⁴ The Church of Scotland, *The Book of Common Order*. St Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 2005.

¹⁵⁵ Torrance, *Marriage in the Light of Holy Scripture*, 38.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 37-38.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 39.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 41.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 41-42.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 43.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 44.

that they are in a homosexual relationship.¹⁶³ Moreover, Torrance states categorically that it is “utterly impossible for a man to give himself in the totality of his being to another man and likewise for a woman to give herself in the totality of her being to another woman”.¹⁶⁴

In his essay on Cohabitation, William D Brown cites some interesting statistics,¹⁶⁵ noting that in 1972 426,000 marriages took place in the UK; in 1993 there were just 300,000. Between 1979 and 1993, the number of single, never-married women cohabiting trebled, to a figure of one in four. In the early 1970s, one in ten women in their first marriage lived with their future husband before marrying, whereas, by 1993, it was seven out of ten. In 1993 56% of men under fifty and 59% of women in the UK were married, the lowest figures since 1931. One third of all marriages ended in divorce and one third of all babies were born to unmarried parents. Further research¹⁶⁶ would show that, by 2001, 2.1 million opposite-sex couples were cohabiting and, by 2011, that figure had risen to 2.9 million.

Brown argues that cohabitation undermines security in a relationship. It encourages what he calls relationship “pick and mix”, which brings with it the real threat of sexually transmitted diseases, since a minimal concern for consequences lead to poorer and less safe choices around sex. This deprives humanity of God’s “glorious vision” of marriage.¹⁶⁷ Brown urges the Church to proclaim what he views as Christian principles, and to acknowledge its calling to highlight all those places where the social order of the world is at odds with these Christian principles. The Church must then also instruct Christians in how best to take an active role in the reshaping of the world in which they live.¹⁶⁸

In a second contribution to the collection, Torrance writes on the subject of divorce. In this essay, he reminds his readers that, no matter how unfaithful Israel was to her God, He never rejected her. Similarly, he argues that men and women cannot be permitted the divorce from each other, that God never demands from them.¹⁶⁹ However, Torrance does concede that there

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 44.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 44.

¹⁶⁵ William D Brown, “Cohabitation”, in David W Torrance (ed) *God, Family and Sexuality*, Handsel Press. Carberry 1997, 48.

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2011/stb-families-households.html> as accessed, 18th September, 2013.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, *Cohabitation*, 59-61.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 62.

¹⁶⁹ David W Torrance, “Divorce: Theological and Pastoral Considerations”, in David W Torrance (ed) *God, Family and Sexuality*, Handsel Press. Carberry 1997, 111.

is a biblical caveat for cases in which divorce would be the “lesser of two evils”, and there is a clearly “irretrievable breakdown in [the] marriage”.¹⁷⁰

In conclusion, we can see the strong Barthian influence that has continued to pervade modern day evangelical, moral thinking in Scotland, as manifested in the work of the SOCU. However, we can also observe some progression, particularly in Torrance's caveat concerning divorce. It is interesting to note also the connection Torrance makes of sexual “sins” being sins against the Covenant between God and humanity, through Christ. I feel that this would not have been a connection that Luther or Calvin would have made, drawing much more obviously from a Barthian stand-point. However, Torrance's focus on so-called “sins of a high hand” does reflect the Calvinistic legalism and dogmatism of earlier Reformed Scottish theology. And it is this over-emphasis of law over grace that I shall address in Chapter 3, utilising Tillich's existential methodology that seeks to re-assert the Reformed vision of morality over moralism, and grace over law.

21st Century theological developments

Christopher Ash

As I approached this dissertation, I carried out an informal poll of those of my Christian friends and contacts in Scotland who consider themselves in any way evangelical, or who came from an evangelical background. This approach sought to indicate which writers on the subject of marriage and sex are particularly influential within Scottish evangelicalism today, and are widely read or recommended amongst younger people. Christopher Ash's books *Marriage: Sex In The Service Of God* and *Married for God: Making Your Marriage The Best It Can Be* were two titles that featured frequently in the response to my informal poll.

Christopher Ash is director of the Cornhill Proclamation Trust, and a Church of England minister. In *Marriage: Sex In The Service Of God*,¹⁷¹ Ash defines marriage as a voluntary sexual and public social union, of one man and one woman (from different families), patterned upon the union of God with his people, and Christ with his Church; intrinsic to this union is God's calling to lifelong exclusive sexual faithfulness.¹⁷² Ash describes the Creation

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁷¹ Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in The Service of God*. Inter-varsity Press, Leicester 2005.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 63.

order as being moral, not just material, extending to actions and character, particularly as they relate to human sex and sexuality.¹⁷³ As a part of the Creation order, marriage is an institution given by God and not a project fashioned by culture. However, Ash also states explicitly that “no ethic that promotes the power of the strong over the weak can be Christian”, and that, further, we “must never mistake the order of creation for an instrument of social control”.¹⁷⁴ Ash appears to view this creation order approach in a similar way to the complementarity of man and woman described by Barth. Men and women are necessarily different, but this comes with it an imperative to look out for the interests of each other, rather than as an excuse for the imposition of ungodly control.

There is, states Ash, a difference between ideal and institution. Viewing marriage as a divine institution, it is not for humans to presume to re-negotiate its terms, structure or calling.¹⁷⁵ If the Creation order is understood to be universal, then all things are part of it, including marriage and including all people, whether Christian or not. Therefore, an ethics of creation must be above both cultural relativity and historic transience; it must be for all people throughout all time, and universality will be what allows the church to speak meaningfully to the world.¹⁷⁶ Although Ash cites the Creation Ordinance as being revealed in Scripture, he believes that it is so challenging that it can only make us uncomfortable.¹⁷⁷ Marriage is part of the moral fabric of creation, given as a gift of grace to humanity as a “non-negotiable shape for sexual relations”.¹⁷⁸

Ash sees procreation as the highest, and most straightforward good of marriage.¹⁷⁹ Second, he values companionship; the relational good, and God’s foremost provision for humanity’s social need. Next, Ash holds up the public good, pointing out the benefits of order for society.¹⁸⁰ Finally, Ash points to self-actualisation as one of the greatest goods of marriage.¹⁸¹ In this, Ash reflects an interesting shift in how the importance of procreation has been viewed since the start of the Reformation. Although procreation is often described with this primacy

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 65-82.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 70.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 82.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 107.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 110.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 124.

by Christians today, this has not been the traditional position ascribed to it, as we have seen, by the Reformers.

Ash argues that sex must be kept for marriage alone, and goes as far as to state that sexual immorality is an expression of idolatry, the essence of which is subjectivism, which can only lead to emptiness.¹⁸² However, he does not regard monogamous relationships out-with marriage as adulterous, and goes as far as to suggest that unmarried cohabitation should be considered marriage, requiring the same expectations of responsibilities.¹⁸³ Adultery, he states, is the turning away from a pledge, inherently secretive, self-destructive, socially destructive and damaging to children.¹⁸⁴

Ash predicates monogamy on monotheism; marriage is between just one man and one woman because there is one God and one created order.¹⁸⁵ However, he offers no biblical justification for this assertion, and it appears tenuous. Finally, Ash links the procreation imperative to the necessity of heterosexuality.¹⁸⁶ Sexual distinction is an essential part of his understanding of the created order, and, according to this reasoning, the good of complementarity can only be achieved through heterosexual marriage.¹⁸⁷ However, we must ask at this point whether the imposition of hetero-normativity could not also be seen as a possible example of imposition of the power of the strong over the weak, and a means of social control. The very fact that same-sex desire, not to mention successful, loving same-sex relationships exist, amongst Christians as well as non-Christians, must suggest that same sex relationships can arguably be considered to be as much part of the created order as opposite sex relationships. I would suggest, therefore, that sexual distinction cannot be the defining factor for complementarity. Rather, we must look for the “otherness” between two individuals, and reformulate ways of encouraging Christians to find healthy ways to experience the promise of God, through human relationships, with integrity and equality.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 133.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 226.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 358-360.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 248.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 247.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 274-276.

Mark Driscoll

Neo-Calvinist American Pastor Mark Driscoll may seem a surprising inclusion into this enquiry. However, it is impossible to ignore the influence of American “mega-church” neo-fundamentalism on the Christian landscape of Scotland and beyond. Driscoll has been hugely influential, particularly in Evangelical circles, and has been a controversial figure, especially in his views around gender and the re-masculinisation of the church.

Driscoll's book *Real Marriage: the Truth About Sex, Friendship and Life Together* (2012),¹⁸⁸ co-authored with his wife, Grace, places marriage resolutely within the terms of Covenant, and argues strongly that the greatest good of marriage is friendship. Driscoll states that the equality of men and women is manifest through their complementarity, with one partner dominant over the other, like a left and right hand. “The biblical pattern for Christian marriage is free and frequent sex” (and Evangelicals have the best sex). It is a sin (according to Driscoll): to have a close friend of the opposite sex (emotional adultery); for a man not to provide financially for his family (through this he earns their respect and that of society); for a wife not to have children if she can; for a wife to work outside the home if she does not need to; and to abstain from sex.

Driscoll lays a strong emphasis on the sexual content of the Songs of Solomon. At the same time he argues that marriage is “not something rooted in culture that can be changed, but rather something rooted in creation that is unchanging”, citing the Creation Ordinance. Wives must submit to their husbands, as Jesus did to his father, but Driscoll is unsuccessful at working this argument into his Trinitarian framework. If, as he states, marriage reflects something of both the Trinity and the Gospel, where Jesus pursues us in love and takes responsibility for us, as an example to husbands and fathers, through the one flesh, there is an innate inequality, and lack of perichoresis in his Christology. Driscoll also claims, in stark contrast to many current statistics, that Christian marriages are less prone to adultery, abuse or divorce.

¹⁸⁸ Mark and Grace Driscoll, *Real Marriage: the Truth About Sex, Friendship and Life Together*, Thomas Nelson Publishing, Nashville 2012.

Steve Chalke

Steve Chalke is an English Baptist minister, whom, as an evangelical youngster, I heard speak many times at youth events and via Christian documentaries. He was a powerful, engaging speaker, who dealt unabashedly with the issues we faced as young people. Described by the Guardian newspaper as a “radical evangelical”, he published, in 2013, in Christianity Magazine, an article that has caused ripples in the conservative evangelical world. In his article, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, Chalke argues that marriage belongs to neither church nor state. He is deeply concerned with the nature of inclusion, urging that principles of justice, reconciliation and inclusion must lie at the heart of Jesus’ message. He states:

One tragic outworking, of the church’s historical rejection of faithful gay relationships is our failure to provide homosexual people with any model of how to cope with their sexuality... we have left people vulnerable and isolated... A key challenge the church faces... is that the Bible does not provide the final answer to a whole number of issues to do with inclusion with which Christians have subsequently wrestled.¹⁸⁹

Chalke also refers to the way that the church has historically dealt with women and slavery, as cases where the church has been required to repent of its wrong ways and re-examine its position. These same principles, which have allowed and enabled change, must, he argues, now be applied to the issue of homosexuality. Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, Chalke boldly reminds his readers: “Tolerance is not the same as Christ-like love”.

Chalke’s declaration has enormous implications, particularly for those within the evangelical Church. By explicitly acknowledging the fact that the Bible does not provide “final answers” to all the issues of our time, he opens a door to the insecurities that come with the nuances of responding theologically to the developments of economics, science, culture and society. However, rather than turning away from these insecurities, Chalke bravely takes responsibility for the damage that has been done by fear and ignorance, and opens the channels for new conversation around a subject that currently threatens to divide the Church irreparably.

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.christianitymagazine.co.uk/sexuality.aspx> as accessed 9th August 2013.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen the development of Reformed theology of marriage, from Luther, Calvin and Knox, through the Westminster Confession of Faith and Scottish school of covenantal theology, Barth and his disciples, and modern day writers of varying perspectives. We have seen that the prevalent consensus has been to see companionship or mutual love as being the greatest good of marriage. Writers such as Ash have gone as far as to suggest that modern day cohabitation should be seen within the terms of marriage, just as it would have been in the times of the “bidey-in”. This, coupled with Chalke’s acceptance of “faithful gay relationships”, appears to point to the need to broaden both the parameters of what we mean when we say marriage. Further, perhaps we even need to ask ourselves whether the term marriage, with all the baggage it brings with it, remains a helpful term at all for the breadth of manifestations of relationships that exist within our community, many of which have not yet been given the opportunity to display covenantal grace, or been acknowledged as so doing.

Chapter 2 – Field Research

Introduction

Having examined the history and progression of the theology of marriage, as it has influenced Reformed Christians in Scotland, it seemed crucial to turn this enquiry to the situation as it exists specifically within the United Reformed Church in Scotland. It is my belief that ordinary members of the Church can only connect with historical theology to a certain extent. Along-side that theology they need ministers and leaders to connect the issues pastorally, the space to express their own perspectives and fears, and the opportunity to engage in conversation with others from as broad a range of perspectives as possible. I therefore decided to undertake a flexible, three-pronged field-research approach, undertaking a congregational survey, opening up a broader “Survey Monkey” questionnaire (following two Synod workshops on the theme of this dissertation) and interviewing ministers and church leaders one-to-one.

It seemed important to me to ground this dissertation in the “real world” situation of what is being thought and spoken about, around marriage, within the Scottish Synod of the URC. In this way I could more immediately, as discussed by Colin Robson in “Real World Research”,¹⁹⁰ draw better attention to the issues and complexities of marriage, as experienced within the Synod, and hope to generate further fruitful conversation and engagement with the issues involved. My feeling was that the confidence of members of Synod could be encouraged towards voicing their own opinions and sharing their stories, if they were able to hear the opinions and stories of both ministers and lay people from within the Synod.

As an Ordinand with the URC in Scotland, I feel that I have some responsibility to use the gift of time devoted to research and study, as part of my ministerial training, productively and usefully. Therefore, with the ever shifting sexual culture of the times we live in, a study in marriage seemed timely. Further, with the debate around same-sex marriage very much on the political and ecclesiological agenda of 2013, undertaking a study that held relevance to the whole population, encompassing those issues and more, seemed useful. Addressing my field research, therefore, as broadly as possible across the Synod, I hope to garner interest and support in taking the conversations that have arisen further, and that this work might,

¹⁹⁰ Colin Robson, *Real World Research: a Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2002, 3.

ultimately, be part of a progressive move forward within the Synod, and even the Denomination.

With this in mind, the research approach that seemed most appropriate was that of critical realism,¹⁹¹ an approach that builds in flexible structures, so as to allow for surprises, difficulties and unexpected, fruitful research avenues presenting themselves along the way. In this way, my hope was that my research could follow the patterns of pastoral ministry, and further enhance my learning as an Ordinand. Critical realism, as an approach, is considered a particularly useful framework for the design of “real world” studies, such as this, as it integrates into itself ways to seek explanation for what exists, without alienating those involved, through its pragmatism and somewhat pastoral approach. This is an approach that allows for critique of the social practices that it studies; a crucial aspect when it comes to an analysis of such a sensitive issue as marriage within the Church. As Robson contends:

If false understandings, and actions based on them, can be identified, this provides an impetus for change. Hence adopting a critical realist stance not only provides a third way between positivism and realism, but might also help fulfil the emancipatory potential of social research.¹⁹²

This understanding forms the basis for this entire dissertation; the clarification of the various traditions and doctrines attached to marriage, with some background in their pre-Christian roots, offers our Synod an opportunity for emancipation from unhelpful attachment to traditions or doctrines that have no place in our twenty-first century Church, and also to begin formulating language and practices that better serve the goals of the New Kingdom.

All interviews were carried out in privacy, at the convenience of interviewees, and full consent was received, along with the provision of a “plain language statement”, as per the policy of the University of Glasgow. It was unavoidable that I should have some level of connection with most of the respondents and interviewees, due to the small size of the Synod. However, all names have been anonymised, and subjects were fully apprised of both the difficulties of total anonymisation, and the intent of the study. Upon the submission of this dissertation, all data, both on paper and computer hard-drive, will be permanently removed from the researcher, and stored securely by the University of Glasgow for ten years.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 41.

Methodology

The human-research for this study was made up of three main strands: a congregational survey, an on-line “Survey Monkey” questionnaire, and one-to-one interviews with ministers and church leaders. Due to the small size of the Scottish Synod, and the even smaller numbers of those willing or able to participate in the study, there are, of course, limitations in the representative scope of empirical findings. However, I believe that the results of this research provide a useful “snap-shot” of the current situation within the Synod and will, I believe and hope, stimulate challenging further reflection.

It seemed important for this study that the perspectives of people of multiple generations, both genders and from the north, south, east and west of Scotland would show how perspectives have, and are continuing to, develop and progress. Further, interviewing ministers and church leaders within the Synod was a primary aspect of my reflection. These are the people charged on our behalf, as Synod members, with much of the Christian education and guidance of our membership, as well as the development of policy and stand-point.

Having traced the development of Reformed theology and practice of marriage over the centuries, it seemed crucial to gain a “snap-shot” perspective of what sorts of relationships are represented in the URC in Scotland, and how those in the Synod view these relationships. To this end, I chose a “representative” congregation from within the Synod, and asked them both for basic demographics and deeper reflections. One of the primary purposes of this dissertation, reflecting my being an Ordinand of the United Reformed Church in Scotland, is to benefit, in some way, the membership of the Synod. Therefore, the research must honestly reflect the perspectives of those in that Synod, and not simply my own, as a researcher. I chose a congregation based on its having a large enough membership to provide enough data from which to take a “snap-shot” of perspectives and life-situations, and its involvement in and understanding of the wider Synod community.

The research with the congregation was split into two parts; the first being undertaken by attendees one Sunday morning post-worship, and the second being “opt-in” (kept separately in paper envelopes) for those willing to answer more in-depth and personal questions. It felt important that no one should be faced with questions of an intimate nature without due warning or consideration. Therefore, the primary questionnaire looked simply for information on: gender identity; age; marital status; whether participants had children or grandchildren;

and the marital status of adult children and grandchildren. These questions were designed to provide a snap-shot as to the range of marital-type relationships represented in a “typical” Scottish URC congregation of a Sunday morning.

The secondary questionnaire explored more deeply issues such as: sexual partners before marriage; sexual activity amongst single people; sexual orientation; and the marital status and sexual orientation of adult children and grandchildren. Further, the questionnaire asked participants to discuss their feelings on: sex out with marriage for Christians; sex between people of the same sex; same sex marriage; whether marriage still has relevance as an institution today; whether there were any relationships they saw within the URC in Scotland that they had difficulty with and, more generally; sexual morality for Christians. These questions were designed to draw out participants further than the initial survey, in the hope that they might offer an insight into the more private thoughts and feelings of the members of a relatively typical Scottish Synod congregation on the issues of marriage, relationships and sexual morality.

As discussed by Robson, the purpose of the surveys was descriptive, aiming to provide basic information about the “distribution of a wide range of people characteristics, and of relationships between such characteristics”.¹⁹³ The importance of this combined data for the wider Synod is that it represents “our voice”, albeit in miniature, and should offer us some direction for fruitful further conversation and study. It was anticipated that the data gleaned from these surveys would be both quantitative and qualitative, offering some useful statistics, as well as insight into the overall “mood” of the membership of the Scottish Synod of the URC concerning marriage, sex and sexuality.

At the 2013 URC Synod of Scotland residential gathering, an overview of the contents of Chapters 1 and 3 of this dissertation was presented, in workshop form.¹⁹⁴ The intent of these workshops was to: encourage broad conversation around the subject of marriage, provide some education based on my research up to that point, and glean a cross-section of perspectives on the subject from Synod members¹⁹⁵ and ecumenical guests, present at the

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 234.

¹⁹⁴ An outline of this workshop can be found at Appendix 3.

¹⁹⁵ Synod gatherings are open to all URC ministers within Scotland, along with two representatives from each congregation, and invited ecumenical guests. All those in attendance have full voting rights.

Synod gathering. Following the workshop, participants were invited to take part in an online Survey Monkey questionnaire. This questionnaire can be found at Appendix 3, and was designed to go deeper into some of the issues discussed in the workshop, with a broader cross-section of Synod members and ecumenical friends. An online platform was chosen in this case, in order to reach the broadest geographical group possible within the Synod. It must be acknowledged, however, that the nature of this questionnaire, as an on-line survey, means that there will be a slight bias towards younger participants having taken part. Further, it must be acknowledged that, as participants in this survey had already taken part in my Synod workshops, their response is likely to have been to some extent influenced by those workshops. Again, as a piece of work designed to benefit the Synod, it was felt that including a broad section of Synod members and Friends in the ongoing conversation around marriage was crucial to this study's relevance to its readership. It was anticipated that the data gleaned from this questionnaire would also be both quantitative and qualitative, offering further useful statistics, and a broader perspective, including as it did participants from across Scotland, rather than just one locale.

Participants for the one-to-one interviews were selected on the criteria of having grown up in Scotland in a Congregational Union of Scotland or Church of Scotland context, and being a minister or leader in the Synod of Scotland. Seven subjects were initially selected; four male and three female, covering ages from the mid-thirties to seventies. This demographic offers a fair representation of the composition of the clergy of the URC in Scotland. However, following the Survey Monkey questionnaire, three further male ministers, one male lay-person and two female lay-people who had filled in the questionnaire after the Synod workshops also volunteered for one-to-one interviews. These conversations complemented my research well, although it must again be acknowledged that their response is likely to have been influenced to some extent by those workshops. Interview conversations served to take further and fill out the responses respondents had given in survey, and built upon themes discussed at workshops. From this, I would deduce that respondents were inspired by both the workshops and Survey Monkey experiences to reflect more deeply on their own relationships and attitudes, and those they observed within the church. In all cases, one-to-one, "semi-structured interviews" were utilised, using open questions. It was the intent of this study to focus on the meaning of the particular phenomenon of marriage to participants, to analyse the individual perceptions of ministers and leaders, and to draw out personal and historical narratives. There was therefore the possibility that these interviews might guide the

future direction of further quantitative research. These factors met well Robson's criteria for the use of such an interview style.¹⁹⁶

Interviews concentrated on the areas of: background (family and church in particular); covenant and creation ordinance; sex out-with marriage; Civil Partnership and same sex marriage; adultery; divorce; monogamy; the role of clergy in marriage; and participants' personal reflections on marriage (theologically and practically). These areas were selected due either to their having emerged as significant themes in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, or their being particularly topical within the Synod, wider church or country at the time of the study. Interviews were conducted one-to-one, with one exception, where a respondent preferred to prepare their answers, and submit them, in email format. It was anticipated that the data from these interviews, addressing the themes covered in Chapter 1 of this dissertation would be largely qualitative and narrative, but also offer some useful trends for analysis, such as bias due to age, gender or geography.

I was interested to find out whether the perspectives of the leaders of the URC in Scotland (present and past) differed in any ways from the “founding-parents” of the Reformed Tradition and, if so, what had led to this development. I was also interested to see whether there were any differences between the perspectives of the leaders of the URC in Scotland and the lay-members of the Synod, and whether there was any tension of perspective between those with formal theological education, and those whose consensus (or lack thereof) governs the direction of the Synod.

One Scottish Congregation surveyed at the end of a worship service

A URC congregation was selected from within the Scottish Synod, with a large enough membership to provide enough data from which to take a “snap-shot” of perspectives and life-situations within the Synod. Following an explanation of the purpose and method of the research during the “Notices” section of a worship service, congregants were invited to fill in a survey (received with their hymn book before the service), and post it into a box provided, at the end of the service. The content of this survey can be found at Appendix 1, and was designed simply to take a snap-shot of marital situations.

¹⁹⁶ Robson, *Real World Research*, 271.

More in depth questionnaires were left out, by the questionnaire box, for those who wished to opt in to this next stage. The content of this survey can be found at Appendix 2, and was designed to gain deeper insights, particularly around the areas of: sexual orientation, sexual activity out with marriage, the question of the relevance of marriage as an institution today, and general sexual morality for Christians. Again, it should be seen simply as a representative snap-shot of an “ordinary congregation” within the URC in Scotland.

Quantitative data from Primary Congregational Survey

In the initial Congregational Survey, forty-one congregants responded. Of these forty-one, 71% were female and 29% male. No one self-identified as transgendered. 83% of respondents were over sixty-five years old, 15% were between forty-five and sixty-four, none were in the twenty-five to forty-five bracket, and 3% under twenty-five. 61% of respondents were married, 34% were single, and 5% reported other (one specifying divorced and one specifying long term partner). Of those who had adult children, 81% reported having children who were married, 52% as having children who were single, 10% as having children who were living with a long term partner and 6% choosing other (on both counts specifying divorced). Of those who had adult grandchildren, 86% reported having grandchildren who were single, 21% as having grandchildren who were married and 14% as having grandchildren who lived with a long term partner.

Quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from Secondary Congregational Survey

In the secondary Congregational Survey, ten congregants responded. Of these ten, six were female and four male. All of the respondents were over 65 years old. Nine of the respondents were married, and one was single.

Of those nine who were married, all reported having had no other sexual partners before their spouse. One respondent also offered the following comments:

In our day condoms etc. were not readily available and a common saying was 'my mother will kill me if I get pregnant' so sex wasn't very common before marriage. Also people married younger; we were twenty-one years. There wasn't even any kissing till the second or third date and obviously not much time for several partners.

Nine of the respondents identified as being heterosexual, and one as being homosexual. Six respondents had children who were married, three had children who were single, and four stated that their children were heterosexual. One respondent had a grandchild living with a long term partner, and two respondents reported that their grandchildren were heterosexual.

Seven of the respondents stated that they believed sex out-with marriage was acceptable for Christians, and three stated that they did not. All respondents noted their preference that sex should be within a long term, committed relationship, with some concerns about the idea of “promiscuity” or “casual relationships”. Eight of the respondents stated that they believed that sex between people of the same sex is all right for Christians, two stated that they did not. Again, there was concern that sex should be kept within long term, committed relationships, but one respondent pointed out that: “we now know that God made them homosexual”.

Five of the respondents stated that they believe that marriage should be for either same sex or opposite sex couples. Four stated that they believe it should be only for heterosexual couples. One stated that they were unsure. Some comments were made on the definition of marriage, with some unsure as to what this should be, and others feeling it was already clearly defined and not up for discussion. Some felt that Civil Partnership was enough of a formal recognition, while one respondent said:

Gay people have made it clear that they are different so why not find a different name for it? However gay marriage will come and I have no problem with that.

Eight of the respondents stated that they believed marriage still has relevance these days. One did not, and one was “unsure”. One respondent felt that promises made in front of friends and family “to make the best you can do, to learn to overcome things together with God's help” was likely to be of benefit to a relationship. Further, another commented that marriage “shows commitment and people may think and try harder to sort things out rather than walk away”. However, this respondent qualified that they did not feel that anyone should remain in an unhappy relationship.

Another respondent felt that, even though they wished it were otherwise, marriage probably did not have much of a relevance “in today's modern society”. Another felt that marriage

contained “eternal values,” but others felt that it only contained “legal coverage,” but that even this coverage was better for couples than not being married.

One person confirmed that they had felt uncomfortable with gay relationships in the URC, stating:

I have struggled over the years with same sex relationships, particularly male homosexual relationships but have come to realise that it (sex) is all part of a loving committed relationship and I should accept this aspect.

When asked to comment freely on sexual morality for Christians, many respondents took seriously the idea that Christians should take sexual relationships seriously, “not frivolously”. Although some respondents felt that, for Christians, sex should be kept exclusively within marriage, the majority were quite comfortable with couples living together before, or instead of, marrying, as long as they did so with respect and love. Commitment and faithfulness were important values, and no matter the sexual orientation of people, they should not be “promiscuous”, although there was acknowledgement that sexual experience before marriage might have long term benefits to long term relationships. One respondent noted that their perspective was coloured by the generation within which they had been raised. Part of this included viewing sexuality in a “pre-pill” time, as well as the Christian teaching they had received. They noted, as did others, that they were ever aware that non-Christians watch the behaviour and standards of Christians keenly, and that this leaves Christians with a responsibility to set a high standard and live Christ-like lives. One particularly interesting comment came from a respondent who questioned whether celibacy or monogamy continue to be necessary or desirable in modern society. They asked whether the focus of morality for Christians should be more about love and care than sex.

Quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from Synod workshop discussions, feedback exercise and post-Synod Survey Monkey

A workshop, run twice, was facilitated at the annual URC residential Synod Gathering at Tulliallen, where the basis of Chapters 1 and 3 of this dissertation were presented, as a means to guided conversation around the topic of marriage. An outline of this workshop can be found in Appendix 3, along with summaries of conversation points that came up, and feedback response. The intent of these workshops was to: encourage broad conversation

around the subject, provide some education based on my research up to that point and glean a cross-section of perspectives on the subject from Synod members and ecumenical friends.

At the close of each workshop, feedback was invited on the following areas: “the most important thing I am taking away or have learned from this workshop is”, “one question I am left with is”, “one personal commitment I am making to making this conversation further in some way is”. Feedback to the first area included: love is the most important attribute, a person's relationship is between them and God, much of what we think of as Christian marriage today is not necessarily biblical, the importance of open conversation, the difference between moralism and morality, the primacy of companionship. Feedback to the second area included: What is Christ-like love? Why should same-sex marriage be called “marriage?” Why are we still having these “hang-ups” in the 21st century? How do we develop just and fair language? Finally, feedback to the third area included: taking time to think about the potential effect of the words we use on others; tolerance; the importance of these conversations happening at a congregational level; the importance of listening and reflection; opening up the question of all relationships; issues for Christians married to non-Christians; issues facing young people around sexuality; speaking up for love and inclusion; displaying love over tolerance; open mindedness; and quality of relationship as the fundamental measure of relationships.

Following the workshops, participants were invited to take part in an online Survey Monkey questionnaire. This questionnaire can be found in Appendix 4,¹⁹⁷ and was designed to delve deeper into some of the issues discussed in the workshop, with a broader cross-section of Synod members and ecumenical friends. As previously noted, the participants' focus is likely to have been influenced to some extent by the workshops they had attended. These workshops are likely to have served to open up the thinking and readiness of participants to discuss these questions, and this renewed openness was something I hoped to tap into for the purposes of the questionnaire. I believe that this should not be considered to limit the significance of the data gleaned. Rather than simply reproducing what had been said during my workshops, these conversations made it possible to deepen engagement with the themes explored in the workshops, which thus provided a useful starting point for consideration and response. From this, participants were stimulated to find ways to articulate their own

¹⁹⁷ This survey asked only for demographics relating to gender, sexual orientation and marital status. By error, no question was included relating to age.

positions, reflect on their own stories and reflect upon where and why their own, personal, perspectives were congruent, or in tension, with the received tradition. Thirty people responded to the Survey Monkey questionnaire. Of these thirty, 47% identified as female, and 53% as male. 70% identified as heterosexual, 7% as homosexual and 7% as “other”. No one identified themselves as transgendered or bisexual, while one person identified as “celibate”. One person commented: “I like not to be 'black and white' about it because I believe we're all a bit more of a mixture than perhaps has been realised”.

79% of respondents were married, 17% were single (including widowed) and 3% lived with a long term partner of the same sex as them. 48% of respondents had adult children who were married, 22% had adult children who were living with a long-term partner of the opposite sex to them, 9% had adult children in a non-domestic relationship with someone of the opposite sex to them, and 48% had adult children who were single. 48% of respondents reported that they had adult children who were heterosexual, 9% that they had adult children who were homosexual, and 26% chose “other”. No one reported that they had children who were bisexual.

When questioned on the purpose of marriage, the following themes emerged: partnership, long term/life-long commitment, mutual respect, love, support, companionship, rejoicing in each one's gifts, the expected route for single people, the exclusion of all others/monogamy, faithfulness, sharing and working together to raise the next generation, enrichment of the wider community, stability for society, covenant, vows in the eyes of God, public commitment, legal contract and sharing adversity.

79% of respondents stated their belief that sex out-with marriage *is* acceptable for Christians, with 21% stated that they believe it is not acceptable. However, the clearly prevailing perspective was that long term, committed relationships were the best place for sexual activity, rather than “casual sex” or “promiscuity”. Other key themes that emerged were an acknowledgement that perspectives have often changed or mellowed over the years, the importance of consent and lack of abuse, while one person stated that they did not feel that Jesus had stated any requirement for sex to be contained only with the “marriage contract”.

79% of respondents stated their belief that sex between people of the same sex *is* acceptable for Christians, with 8% saying it was not, and 13% stating that they are unsure. Overall,

respondents were far more concerned with relationships being long-term and committed, than with the gender make-up of those relationships. Other themes that emerged were the tendency of human beings to attempt to exert control out of fear, the acknowledgement of God's hand in the creation of gay and lesbian people, the primacy of love, sex as a gift of God.

87.5% of respondents stated that they believe marriage should be for both same sex and opposite sex couples, 12.5% stated that they believe it should be only for opposite sex (heterosexual) couples. Other themes that emerged were that marriage is a covenant that has been constantly redefined over the years, usually to the improvement of equality, how much of the current conversation has been based on misunderstanding and prejudice, and the primacy of love.

When questioned on their thoughts and feelings on sexual morality for Christians, the following key themes emerged: quality and depth of relationship, the need to let go of fear and embarrassment, discipline as a route to freedom of community, the primacy of love and respect, the Christian calling as a higher calling above rules or laws, discomfort with the idea of “casual sex”, and the importance of faithfulness and commitment.

One-to-one interviews with clergy and church leaders

Initially, seven clergy and church leaders were selected, on the basis that they: were Scottish; had grown up religiously in Reformed Tradition churches (in all cases either the Congregational Union of Scotland or the Church of Scotland); and had administered the majority or all of their ministry in Scotland. Three women and four men were selected; a ratio which is roughly representative of the gender split amongst URC ministers in Scotland. Their ages ranged from mid-thirties to seventies. However, following the Survey Monkey questionnaire, three more (male) ministers volunteered for interview, along with three lay-people. Here too, it must be acknowledged that these participants' focus is likely to have been influenced to some extent by the workshops they had attended. However, this focus proved to be a fruitful foundation for interview conversations; subjects having had some time, after the workshops and through the Survey Monkey, to reflect upon their own positions and responses to discussions that had been had. I found that participants were keen to offer insights from their own histories and enthusiastic about the prospect of taking these conversations further, within the Synod and beyond.

For the purposes of this study, respondents were assigned “code-names” as follows:

Andrew; a man in his forties, a leader within the URC in Scotland

Anne; a woman in her forties, a minister within the URC in Scotland

Benjamin; a man in his sixties, a former URC minister in Scotland

Betty; a woman in her sixties, a URC minister in Scotland

Campbell; a man in his seventies, a former URC minister in Scotland

Catherine; a woman in her forties, a URC minister in Scotland

Donald; a man in his sixties, a URC minister in Scotland

Doris; a woman in her sixties, a URC member in Scotland

Euan; a man in his fifties, a URC minister in Scotland

Elizabeth; a woman in her forties, a URC member in Scotland

Fergus; a man in his sixties, a URC minister in Scotland

Graham; a man in his thirties, a URC member in Scotland

Harry; a man in his fifties, a URC minister in Scotland.

All questions were left as open ended as possible, and interviews were conducted in a conversational manner. It was felt that this style suited best the timbre of theological enquiry and discernment that already exists within the URC in Scotland, and would also best aid deep reflection on the parts of the interviewees. Interviews concentrated on the areas of: background (family and church in particular); covenant and creation ordinance; sex out-with marriage; Civil Partnership and same sex marriage; adultery; divorce; monogamy; the role of clergy in marriage; and participants’ personal reflections on marriage (theologically and practically). Interviews were conducted one-to-one, with one exception, where the respondent preferred to prepare their answers, in email format.

Amongst those interviewed, there were men and women between the ages of “thirties” to “seventies”, who identified as hetero- and homo-sexual, and were in relationships and single. Some had been previously widowed or divorced. Some had children and others did not. Some were grandparents, and some great-grandparents. Most came from families where both parents had been together for many decades, while some came from families where the parents had separated. Some had children who were married, others had children who lived together with a partner. All, with one exception, had grown up in Scotland, in either the Congregational Union of Scotland (precursor to the URC in Scotland), or the Church of

Scotland. Some had been the children of ministers themselves, again either in the Congregational Union of Scotland or the Church of Scotland.

Interview Data

Family Backgrounds

Interviewees were asked to reflect on their family backgrounds, in terms of the family they had grown up in and the family they now lived within. Seven were men, five were women. Of the thirteen people interviewed, eleven were married. One subject identified as homosexual. One subject had been previously widowed, and one had been divorced. Both were remarried. Eleven subjects had children, one of whom had adopted children and two of whom had step-children. Five subjects had grandchildren.

Donald, the father of adopted children, had strong feelings about the purpose of marriage not being procreation, in part based on the experience of not having been able to have children naturally with his wife and of the very hurtful comments they had received. Benjamin reflected on having been raised in a single parent family in the post-war period, and having felt very accepted and welcome in his Congregational church. He also felt that others, with unorthodox family situations, were just as welcomed in that place. Catherine spoke of the importance of the strong sense of belonging and family that became their dominant image of church:

How that sense of belonging impacts the different decisions we make in our lives, and how on a wider scale we then belong to the universal family of the church, and the quality of relationship we have in that is very important to me. [This] raises all sorts of questions about how we welcome those who are different from us and how we can be a community, where differences are respected and upheld and lived with, even if they're things we find very difficult to come to terms with individually. I think that's what true inclusion, and the community of the church is called to be.

While this would be less usual these days, most interviewees' parents had married young, usually while still in their teens. Doris and Graham both came from families where one parent was Roman Catholic, and the other from a Protestant tradition. Doris further commented that, although her daughter had not been raised with an explicit expectation of

“no sex before marriage”, the daughter had made this choice herself, which Doris ascribed to “a high expectation of herself”.

Church Backgrounds

Interviewees were asked to reflect on their Church backgrounds, in terms of the churches they had grown up in and, particularly, the theological biases of those churches. Of the thirteen people interviewed, two had a father who was a minister. Ten had grown up in church, while three had come to active church involvement later in life; one as an older child, one as a teenager and one after marrying. Three folk reflected that they had been far more evangelical during their teenage years, but that life experience had somewhat tempered their perspectives. Seven folk had been brought up exclusively in the Congregational Union of Scotland, three had been brought up in the Church of Scotland.

Graham, who had been raised in a Catholic-Protestant home, had one sibling who was now part of an independent evangelical congregation and one sibling who was not interested in church at all. Graham reported having waited until he was married to engage sexually with his wife, whereas both siblings had had their children many years before marrying their partner. However, he did not feel that the different churches the siblings were part of, or not, had had much of an influence on these different choices made.

Marriage as a covenant

Subjects were divided as to whether they believed that marriage should be viewed as a covenant. Euan asked:

Does a relationship have the ability to mirror God's relationship with humanity? That is the most important question, others follow on from it. And that understanding allows us to speak much more openly and compassionately.

Andrew described marriage in terms of a contractual-covenantal relationship between two people, with an integral recognition of the community's involvement. A marriage, he stated, is a community thing, as much as it is between those two folk, and the community aspect should be more important to the church than it tends to be. Marriage is less when the community is not involved; it is more difficult and isolated.

Campbell felt that a covenant is established in a marriage, through the taking of the vows. He saw a lot of parallels between marriage and ordination for ministry; both being covenant relationships entered into through the making of solemn vows, and something into which human beings are called.

Benjamin quoted a former Old Testament Professor from their college years, Morton Price, suggesting that the language of Covenant:

Meant to cut a covenant, and the theory at that time was that the ritual around covenant involved vertically splitting a growing sapling - the parties to the covenant would then pass through. The sapling was then bound up again, and it grew back together – a powerful symbolism. Based on this I have emphasised the covenant part as something rooted and alive and dynamic, rather than something legalistic, in wedding sermons. It is about a lively relationship and not a contract.

Benjamin went on to state his opinion that:

Because we've theologised about marriage in not a very healthy way, we have tended to view marriage as an end, rather than the wedding as a beginning. Covenant is ongoing, not an end in self, or a description of where two parties are and remain static. It's the notion of a living relationship, not a contract.

Further, Benjamin questioned whether the language of Covenant still has meaning for folk today. He pointed out that, when Christians have used marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel, or Christ's relationship with the Church, we have been referencing relationships in which there is a clear dominant and submissive partner, and that this is not necessarily a very good way of looking at modern day marriage. In fact, he argued, these analogies may have helped to fix the idea of patriarchal marriage; something he felt strongly that is best let go of. Hosea's images of God's acceptance and continual openness, with a "constancy and willingness to start again and again and again" might be useful as a theology for understanding God's relationship with us, but are not so useful when transferred to our theological understanding of marriage. "I've seen marriages where folk grow together", he stated, "to the point of becoming grafted. Where these things are achieved there is something glorious, that you want to celebrate and you want to attribute to God."

However, Euan said that he would struggle to see marriage as a reflection of God's covenant with humanity, and Donald accepted the covenantal analogy only as far as Christ commanded us to love one another, as God loves us. Catherine felt that it was important to differentiate

between the ideas of covenant and commitment, and that she was far more comfortable with the language of commitment than covenant, which has some rather negative connotations in some Scottish ecumenical circles.

Anne thought that God's covenant with humanity has to be inclusive of all people, so marriage must then also be an expression of that inclusivity. However, she felt that it was important that we as Christians do not fall into the trap of thinking that a person who is not married has any less of a relationship with God. Rather, we should see marriage as a mirror for the community we see in God.

Campbell described marriage as a vocation to which only some are called, designed to “reflect and communicate the loving commitment of God to His people”. Doris pointed to the importance of understanding the elastic and contextual narrative of God’s relationship with the historical people of Israel, and humanity today. She identified love as being core to that narrative, saying:

I suppose people can think you’re wishy-washy for talking about love, and that love should have some sort of element of discipline in it. But I think that love is bigger than that... I always want to hold open the door and the space, not cut anyone off. That can seem wishy-washy but it actually could be radically other than that.

Marriage as a creation ordinance

Benjamin challenged the idea of marriage as a Creation Ordinance. Certainly, he agreed, it is part of God’s plan for us that we have good relationships. But theology must be ever evolving. Any idea of marriage as being divinely instituted for the purposes of procreation must be understood in time-bound context:

With teaming millions in the planet today, that doesn't wash. We have a given understanding, in a given time, and that works for folk of that time, but it doesn't mean it's set in concrete for generations to come. I believe in an evolving theology.

Benjamin also referred to John McQuarrie, who talks about marriage as a sacrament, going on to argue that consummation is part of that sacrament, based on the fact that failure to consummate a marriage is a ground for annulment. This is a theology that Benjamin could not countenance, calling it a simple example of “daft theology”. Daft theology would be any

theology that is transplanted unhelpfully from a time and a place that we are not in any more. He pointed out:

We're not Judaic, we're not Ancient Greek, we're twenty-first century Scots, and we need to be as questioning of the theology that's handed down to us as anything else.

We have been dogmatic too much.

Fergus would be hesitant to use the language of Creation Ordinance. He felt that marriage is not necessarily ordained by God, but is perhaps a “god-like” thing that we have learned, as society has grown and developed. In Euan's theological understanding, marriage is the same as any committed relationship. Marriage or any other committed relationship has, he believed, the capacity to:

mirror the loving relationship of God to God's creation; that ability to forge loving relationships can be a hint of heaven. Tradition changes quite dramatically, so it's unhelpful to talk about traditional marriage. There is an ‘ordered-ness’ of society reflected in marriage, that offers some stability for some people, but the prior question must be the quality and depth of a relationship, which may, but need not necessarily lead to marriage.

Andrew suggested that the idea of “creation ordinance” probably suited the way people understood marriage at the time they were writing, but did not still work. Further, looking at the polygamous models of ownership of women in the Hebrew Scriptures, they suggested that it was clearly not particularly helpful to use that as a model of God's relationship with humanity. This was the problem, he thought, of attempting to use conflicting world views to describe marriage.

Benjamin felt that:

Once upon a time, marriage was about the reinforcement of the status quo, in pastoral-tribal terms. Then we moved into the family model, to today where we can be an independent human being, without the wrapping of holy matrimony. We've made claims that marriage hasn't always stood up to.

Anne linked the idea of Creation Ordinance to Genesis 2:¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Genesis 2:18 “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’”

it's not good for people to be alone. In order to be fully human you need other people. However, I don't think you need to be in a marriage to be a full person. You can be single and be a full person, as long as you get the right relationships.

Sex out-with marriage

Across the board, those interviewed were quite comfortable with the idea that those who are not married might engage in sexual relationships, although a few older interviewees felt it was not the ideal. Fergus did not think that there were now many churches where there are not folk in membership who are in sexual relationships outside marriage. In his own church, and in others, there were ordained Deacons¹⁹⁹ whom he knew to be in sexual relationships, but not married, and he felt that it is “not my business to make value judgements about relationships that are patently warm, loving and complete”. He added that there is “such scope for people arriving at what is good for them. I couldn’t tell folk what is good for them”. This he saw as strongly indicative of changes in social *mores* over the last forty years. Both Fergus and Donald offered the example of the addresses given by brides and grooms on their pre-marriage paperwork; forty years ago there would have been separate addresses, whereas these days that that would be very rare, and he would be surprised if couples were not already living together. Donald suggested that, these days, this would only tend to be for the sake of their families’ need for “appearances to be kept up”.

Fergus identified this change as occurring between the 1970s and 1990s. He observed that it did not seem to have resulted in a reduction of the amount of weddings he was asked to conduct. He also observed that most people had several shorter term relationships behind them before they married and that, after three to seven years of living together with their partner, tended to feel the impulse to turn that relationship officially into a marriage. Similarly, Donald felt that people still want to marry because, deep down, they feel a sense of societal expectation. The idea of marriage still means something to people, but what it means has changed a lot. He admitted that he would still be a little uncomfortable if his own daughter lived with someone, and that he was still a rather traditional or old-fashioned father, even though his ultimate concern was his daughter’s happiness.

¹⁹⁹ Although most URC churches now have a team of ordained Elders, elected by the congregation, some URCs continue instead with Deacons, as was the practice of the Congregational Union of Scotland. However, the administration and function of both are largely identical.

Harry wondered why so many people do still choose to marry these days, when there is no longer any stigma around not doing so, but Fergus said that he felt that couples see marriage as a milestone of adulthood; simply part of the cultural model that we live with and uphold as a society. He suggested that if marriage is introduced for same sex couples, there would also be a progression towards a similar culture for gay couples within twenty or thirty years.

Euan speculated on the possibility that western Christianity has placed far too much emphasis on the sexual act, given the simple fact that more people live together before marrying than not. In an age in which birth control is common place and relatively reliable, the consequences of sex out-with marriage are totally different from what they used to be. This needs to influence how we view sex within society. Euan also questioned the “inordinate amount of time” spent by churches fixated on sexual issues, “while a child dies of malaria every sixty seconds”.

Donald acknowledged that couples living together before marriage is simply a step the world has taken. Sex, he stated, has a different place in our lives from that which it once had. It is no longer primarily considered to be simply for procreation. He confessed his continuing discomfort with what he called “recreational sex” as this seemed more about people using each other, yet acknowledged that, even though things are not perfect now, they were also not perfect fifty years ago. Although today there is a good deal of pressure on young people to become sexually active, in years gone by there was a culture of silence around sex, which could mean that women would feel less able to report sexual assaults, and those entering into marriages were somewhat naive about what sex could, or should, be like.

Within the last ten years, Andrew had faced a disciplinary hearing for living with his (female) partner before they were married. Andrew was working at this time for the Church of Scotland and, although the couple was engaged to be married, the church felt that he was breaching Christian codes of morality and living in an explicitly inappropriate way, as a leader within the church. Ultimately the case was dismissed, but Andrew felt that the episode was a stark reminder of the reality of the church's position, when it comes to issues such as cohabitation.

Anne believed that power is the most important issue in the discussion of sexual ethics. To share your body with another person, is emotionally very intimate and very powerful. This must not be underestimated, and young people should be encouraged only ever to share themselves to that level when they really want to. She pointed out that sex when you are young has a very powerful effect, emotionally, and can all too easily lead to a young person committing to the wrong person, having created a level of depth of relationship that they were not yet ready for.

Catherine echoed this perspective, placing great importance on a relationship's not being exploitative. Sex within committed, loving relationships, however, was preferable to her. She viewed sexual relationships as the most intimate form of physical relationship we can enter into with another person, and hoped that people would do that in a relationship where love and deep friendship was the bond between them. She felt that these sorts of relationships were essentially marriages, whether or not a declaration is made formally or publicly.

Benjamin pointed out that marriage is about a lot more than just sex. Further, the sexual act is an expression of other things than simply the marriage bond. Both Elizabeth and Graham acknowledged that their perspectives on sex before marriage had mellowed as they had got older. When they were younger they had been a good deal more absolute in their views that sex before marriage was wrong for Christians, but now felt comfortable with the idea that, as long as a relationship was stable and committed, these relationships might be sexual.

Benjamin remembered that:

Growing up, “there were three main reasons not to copulate on a regular basis: the stigma of being found out, unwanted pregnancy, and the clap. But behind this was the conservative attitude of the Church saying; your sexuality can only truly be fulfilled in a loving, committed relationship, and God gave us marriage for that. One was sheer pragmatism, the other could be interpreted as theological gloss.

Further, Benjamin hypothesised that the choices and pressures are probably worse for this generation today. The risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections is greatly reduced, and there is a culture of openness around sex and sexuality. However, the consequence of this is that some of the limitations and taboos around sexual relationships have been removed, which would have previously offered a reassuring structure and safety-net to young people.

Gender

Catherine reflected on the gendered roles of her own parents, and how easy it was to fall into those same roles, in her own marriage. Benjamin reflected on how marriage can be an economic prison for some women. Anne enthused about how learning more about transgender issues and identity has been very liberating to her understandings of gender. She reflected on pastoring in a congregation that has many LGBT members.

Pastoring such a diverse church has been a wonderful journey, but on a practical level, writing liturgy is nightmarish! Now I try not to work in binary for anything; we have a Trinitarian God, so let's at least start there. It's been a real growing experience for our community to rethink stereotypes and see value in other places. The transgender stuff has also been very powerful. People that transition really know what it is to have the courage to change; the rest of us have so much to learn from that journey, about our reactions, about God.

Civil Partnership and same-sex marriage

On Civil Partnership, Fergus, echoing the language of Tillich²⁰⁰ stated: “Civil Partnership is about law, but marriage is about grace. Why would we exclude from grace large swathes of society?” Euan also pointed out that Civil Partnership is a purely legal construct. Should heterosexuals want to choose it, over civil marriage, he felt that they were making a “diminished” but absolutely valid choice. What is important is consistency across the board, no matter of sexuality. “Social control”, he argued, “is restrictive not liberating”. This perspective was echoed by other interviewees, including Andrew, who struggled to see the difference between Civil Marriage and Civil Partnership, but believed that both forms should be available to all people. He felt that the lack of difference between the two begins to force us to address the weight we put on the word “marriage”, perhaps without fully realising it. Harry suggested that Civil Partnership is only differentiated from Civil Marriage through the use of language; Civil Partnership is more explicitly merely a contract, whereas the use of the word “marriage” appears to have an emotional resonance of some kind. This observation implies an understanding of marriage that includes something far deeper than that which is attached by law.

²⁰⁰ See Chapter 3, p.76.

Benjamin suggested that Civil Partnership can effectively stigmatise people, placing the relationships of same-sex couples in a second grade classification. However, Catherine felt that:

Civil Partnership is a very appealing thing, I don't see why mixed sex couples couldn't have access to it, but I wonder if Civil Partnership is about covenanted relationship without any sense of a religious aspect. If you absolutely don't want any sense of God, then I'm quite happy for it; if anything it might be the better model, like how the French have it.

Elizabeth pointed out that, from time to time, Civil Partnership might best benefit those not in a relationship, as is possible in France, citing the example of two sisters who had both lost their husbands and were sharing a house; Civil Partnership would be a welcome safeguard for the property and inheritance rights of these two women.

Fergus, who ministers in a joint URC/Church of Scotland congregation, noted that the Church of Scotland tends to be more legalistic than the URC. He would be favourably disposed to blessing a civil Partnership, but that that would be a matter of church discipline within the Church of Scotland part of his remit as a minister. He expressed his desire for there to be ever more open and trusting conversations between congregations and ministers, with a view to moving the conversation forward around same sex relationships. Fergus also reflected on how divisive the issue of same sex relationships is for the church at the moment, and the fact that the church has a responsibility to work out its God-given response to gay relationships and how to handle them:

Two different kinds of churches [liberal and evangelical] with two radically different approaches can't be good for people's perspectives, but what can we do? The change will happen over twenty, thirty, forty years. Interestingly, thirty, forty years ago, it was also true that if you had been divorced, openly living together, in a mixed Protestant-Catholic relationship, or had children, you probably would have had the same problem as people in same sex relationships today; in their time these issues were dramatic too.

Donald explained that his position had changed over the last ten years. Originally he would have considered marriage to be exclusively for opposite sex partners. However, his own experience, not being able to have children naturally with his wife, and the judgement he felt

to be implied in the procreative bias of many Christians, had deeply affected his position. He stated:

I get upset and angry at the drivel that is said about marriage just being for procreation; it hurt me to hear said that my marriage is invalid. I've come round more to the idea that marriage is simply about love between two people. And if they happen to be of the same sex then that is fine.

Euan commented that:

I celebrate love wherever I find it; it's a contradiction to the fractured nature of so many relationships. There is no difference; two people wanting to commit to each other is a sign of God's commitment to God's people.

Further, he said:

I absolutely despair of those who fear the redefining of marriage, or that it will corrupt our kids; what that does that is avarice and violence, it disregard what exists in human relationships. What saves our young and old alike is the expression of committed, self-giving love. I cannot help but think there is joy in Heaven over love expressed.

Anne saw the on-going campaign for equal marriage in the UK as a wonderful opportunity to redefine marriage, rather than this idea being a threat. If marriage can be redefined as being a covenant of love, rather than about narrow classifications of male and female, we have the opportunity to eliminate oppressive stereotypes and historical injustices. This, she hoped, might free marriage up to become about:

healthy relationships that are beneficial for the individuals, and beneficial for society as a whole, so I'm excited! It's an opportunity to transform marriage and make something that's more healthy. It's about more than equality; it's an opportunity for transformation.

Further, she thought that:

there is no logical reason, nor valid theological reason, to say that same sex couples can have all legal rights but not be married. Our primary motivation must be the principle that humans are all made in the image of God; so to deny some people something is fundamentally a justice issue, as we're all created in image of God.

Donald also commented that he was very open to blessing same sex relationships, and also doing weddings if the law changes, and had said at a recent URC Synod that he would be delighted so to do. In his own church there had been some discomfort around this issue with the Deacons, until one older lady said she had a grandson “of that type”. This revelation had changed the whole tone of the conversation. Donald expressed his frustration at people who misquote the Bible, or pick out certain things and choose to ignore others. He pointed out that:

the Bible tells me I shouldn't wear mixed fibres; so people who say men should not ‘lie down with men’, they pick out certain parts, but they're quite happy to ignore others. You can always pick part of the Bible to make any argument. I find no reference to Jesus ever having said anything about gays; his instruction was to love one another. He absolved the woman who was caught in adultery, so if he can do that why shouldn't I say; if people love each other and they want to make a commitment, then so be it.

Similarly, Harry was keen to emphasise that we should not try to project what Jesus might have said into today, but remember that he lived in a very different time, in terms of life and society, when folk were held by rules that are no longer applicable today. He felt that using the Bible as a way to support what he saw as bigotry, when it came to same sex relationships, was just the same as how this has been done in the past to support slavery or suppress women. Echoing Benjamin's previous comment about “daft theology”, he also referenced the above passage from Leviticus, and cautioned against thinking that the Church was able to “speak for God”, given that “anything that involves man is going to corrupt what we think is God.”

Euan observed that there is an “over-interest” in what gay men do in bed together, and suggested that this is an “interesting throwback to male dominance and how society understands itself”. He stated:

How dare we dictate to God who God loves or accepts? This is not dewy-eyed, half applied Joseph Fletcher ethics here; love *is* the heart of it all; we know that because of Jesus. And therefore because of God. So we must live as if that's true.

Divorce

The general consensus amongst interviewees was that divorce is ever an easy option, but is sometimes absolutely essential. They did not believe that to divorce was to commit adultery,

as appears to be indicated in Matthew 19.²⁰¹ Euan expressed his suspicion of any rules that appeared to exist simply to exercise social control, and that previous Christian traditions around divorce seemed very weighted against women. He pointed out that divorce can allow women in particular to break out of situations of cruelty. The force of moral persuasion (and the law) is sometimes the only way that this is possible.

Fergus argued that it is:

not tenable to have a society where divorce is not permitted. Where this has happened in earlier generations, people live in destructive, abusive situations for the rest of their lives, when there is no doubt that lives can be repaired after divorce. I believe that in most circumstances folk will work hard to make their marriage covenant work. But when all else fails, we have to name it and move on.

Andrew, who was himself divorced, pointed to how badly the church copes with divorce, and talked of how badly he felt he had been failed by the church during such a difficult time in his life. On the question of divorcees remarrying in the church, Doris stated that:

As a minister you are not there to say yes or no to people, but to foster the true well-being of those people concerned. All of life is under God. Divorce is a sad reality, out of the pain and hurt that is caused, but it is still a reality.

Adultery and fidelity

There was something of a spectrum in the ways in which how interviewees viewed the notions of adultery and fidelity. Several commented that, these days, it is not simply a sexual act that can transgress the covenanted (or otherwise) understanding between two people. Some felt that close emotional bonds between people who were not married were absolutely fine, while others believed that if this emotional closeness was a replacement for closeness within the marital relationship, it would still qualify as infidelity. Euan thought that the core issue is one of betrayal, where there is a compromising of the commitment of a couple. He pointed to the “emotional entanglement [that] can happen when souls collide or coincide” and asked; “Is that a compromising of another relationship, or just the complexities of some human life; we find all these entanglements as part of the way we are?”

²⁰¹ Matthew 19:9 “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.”

Several interviewees agreed that the breaking of trust is a key aspect of adultery or infidelity. This allowed for a less dogmatic stance; if a couple was not yet legally divorced but sexually involved with a new partner they would not, under this understanding, be committing adultery. Several people also acknowledged that the betrayal of the trust of sexual intimacy feels like one of the deepest betrayals of all, yet felt that unfaithfulness by means of dishonesty or deception in any respect was perhaps the most common form of infidelity. Anne asked whether the question of unfaithfulness became much more challenging once we took sex out of the picture. Graham said that his perspectives had broadened as he got older, from a narrowly physical understanding of adultery, to one that included the emotional aspect.

Doris stressed that she does not see herself as belonging to another person, but that the commitments of marriage must be renewed day by day. Day by day there will also be failures in those vows, but that on-going and renewing commitment is the point of marriage. Doris also referred to Matthew 5, where Jesus says “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart”.²⁰² Having worked in Sexual Health Advice, she had done a good bit of work with clients as they wrestled with whether to tell their partner of their infidelity. Clients had made decisions in both directions, and Doris acknowledged that, at times, partners chose not to ask questions around areas to which they did not wish to know the answers. She felt that “an extraneous sexual encounter need not be the end of a relationship. But how you rebuild trust in that context is difficult”. Further, she pointed to the importance of non-judgemental communication around issues such as monogamy saying:

“it’s natural and normal to be attracted to people outside one’s relationship. What you do in relation to that is what matters. You can easily get into a downwards spiral and all sorts of difficult places. We are all interconnected; people don’t need someone else to pass judgement, they need help”.

Monogamy

Although most interviewees acknowledged that there are some people who successfully and with integrity negotiate polyamorous or open relationships, they all expressed the strong belief that monogamy and exclusivity is the ideal within Christian marriage. Several

²⁰² Matthew 5:31,32.

expressed concerns over the patriarchal legacy of polygamy, present in the Hebrew Scriptures and still in parts of the world today, especially when this meant that women are very poorly treated. Thus, Euan felt that these kinds of marriages “solidify inequality”, and Anne acknowledged that her anxiety about such marriages was rooted in the potential imbalance of power and her own feminist perspective.

However, in contrast, Catherine suggested that ideas around polyamory and non-monogamous marriages could open up interesting avenues around the notion of community that would sit well within a Christian understanding of love and community, although she found the idea personally very challenging. She speculated that it might be entirely possible to be in a relationship, with integrity, with more than one person at a time, just as it is perfectly possible to love all her children equally. However, Catherine reflected that her world view is very much conditioned by the prevailing European world-view, which continues to be the dominant world view within society.

Benjamin reflected on the second Congregational Union Assembly, in 1972, at which the secretary for the “Social Moral Questions Committee” presented a report suggesting that it might be useful to be less dogmatic about premarital and even extra marital sex, pointing out that world had changed and asserting that procreation was no longer a matter of national concern. The report even suggested that there might be “possibilities around couples sharing the hospitality of the marriage bed”. It was received very badly by the Assembly, and the consequences were dire for its author. Benjamin did not agree with the most controversial of the suggestions made in that report, but felt that it was an interesting conversation for Christians to have, given that polygamy was clearly part of the Old Testament world. Indeed, this conversation, if had today, might open up helpful avenues around new ways to approach the questions of sex outside of marriage and cohabitation.

The role of clergy in marriage

Anne questioned whether it remains valid for ministers to act as registrars for the State:

I wouldn't be unhappy if that role was removed and kept only for the state. It could be worth revisiting the question; is it still a reasonable or appropriate function for ministers to carry out? If it's the person who is registered, not the place, it's harder to be neutral; a person has more influence.

Similarly, Catherine understood her role as:

doing the legal bit on behalf of the state, and providing space for commitments to be made in front of friends and family, which is in the context of the much bigger relationship folk have with God.

What is marriage?

Benjamin felt that we need to discover afresh what marriage means in our age and our day. He described his view as being evolutionary, in that he felt that the model of marriage has moved from being tribal to being individual. In this new phase the individual has to choose what relationships they want, rather than being bound by what was once obligatory. He suggested that the Church's part in all of this is to support folk in their exploration, and encourage them to learn how to look after themselves and make wise choices. The Church's role is not to sit outside and condemn, but rather to encourage people to "build something beautiful", that liberates both partners, helps them grow and is wholesome. The Church should not be making up laws or check-lists:

now and again the church needs to remind itself that it has invited Jesus to legislate, and he constantly avoided legislation. When folk asked 'Who is my neighbour?' he told them a story [about] who did the most loving thing, and this is the kind of thing behind situational ethics.

Doris observed:

we human beings are very liable to lay down laws for each other and assume that that is the right way to do things, and I'm not convinced that it is... It has come home to me that we haven't thought enough about what constitutes a Christian marriage. I still want to say that what makes a marriage Christian is the attitude and dynamic of a 'giver-relationship,' not someone else's pronouncement. Maybe we don't trust God enough. Maybe we don't trust each other enough. The church is as limited as every other human thing.

Andrew argued that it is not the wedding ceremony that makes a marriage, and that a couple who live together are effectively married. He suggested that the "wedding part" of a marriage is about the community, and should not be as expensive and competitive as it has become. Graham questioned the necessity for any ceremony at all:

if the couple are committed, and decide not going to get married, but move in together and have kids, and are together for many years, are they any less married than a couple that has gone to a church or a registry office, said the vows and signed the papers, is that couple any less valid?

Ultimately, he felt that: “they’re married even though it’s not on paper”.

Further, Catherine argued that there should be no imperative for Christians to legally marry at all, reflecting that there was nothing about the long-term relationships of her friends who have chosen not to marry that is in any way less than those of her friends who have married. What was important in her own marriage was the public declaration of the relationship and her and her husband’s (Christian) commitment to each other. Catherine was also open to the idea of civil partnership and religious marriage becoming separate, as they are, for instance, in France.

Conclusion

The research undertaken for this chapter, including two congregational surveys, a Synod-wide Survey Monkey questionnaire and one-to-one interviews with ministers, leaders and members of the Synod, has revealed a span of perspectives broadly congruent with the trajectory of the Reformed tradition. The issues of the primacy of companionship, sex out-with marriage, Covenant and Creation Ordinance, gender, Civil Partnership and same-sex marriage, divorce, adultery and fidelity, monogamy and the role of the Church in marriage have all emerged as questions close to the hearts of those who took part in my research: all bear further unpacking and conversation within the Synod. There has not emerged a significant difference between the perspectives of clergy and lay-people, although it might be said that, on the whole, clergy proved to be more consistently comfortable with the idea of same-sex marriage than those lay people questioned.

One particularly interesting finding was the discomfort expressed amongst (predominantly older) respondents around the idea of promiscuity, or sex that is not contained within long-term, committed relationships, of any gendered formulation. There seems to me a question raised by this fact around how these respondents expect those in a relationship to get to the point of long-term committed relationships, without learning to know each other, in part, through sexual intimacy. Perhaps there is a generational perspective that has inverted; one

generation taking as a norm the idea that sex should become part of a relationship once a couple have learned each other emotionally and practically, with another (my own) taking as a norm the idea that sexual intimacy is the means by which a couple learns about each other. This idea will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 – Moving Forward

Having traced the trajectory of marriage in the Reformed tradition in Scotland to the present, and taken a survey of the relationships and opinions held within the Synod of Scotland, we must now seek out ways to develop a grounded, theologically congruent strategy for the future. I feel a strong sense of the importance of drawing heavily upon the approaches of our forebears, while also maintaining a clear understanding of their historical context, and remembering that the Reformed tradition is committed to continual Reformation and progression: *semper reformanda*.²⁰³

With this in mind, I have chosen to address the questions raised in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation through the existentialist approach of Paul Tillich, the theology of embodiment formulated by James B Nelson, and the socio-theological lens of Michael Vasey. These authors have been chosen for engagement with the ongoing theological question of marriage due to the profound influence that their work has had within the international Reformed movement. In particular, Tillich, although Lutheran in background, has had a marked influence on the ways that present day Reformed theology frames the deepest questions of human existence within the explicit call to justice.²⁰⁴ This approach reminds us never to stray from the Reformed imperative towards Grace over Law. Nelson, an American Congregational minister and academic, was involved in the work of the United Churches of Christ's Task Force on Human Sexuality during the 1970s, and has been pivotal in challenging traditional Christian perspectives on sex and relationships. The socio-economic approach of Vasey enables a more specifically UK-centric perspective, and its ethical focus upon "New Kingdom Values" is particularly useful to the Synod of Scotland. Little has been written in Scotland from the Reformed perspective on marriage or sexual ethics. These authors may provide a useful starting point for further, more explicitly Scottish theology, offering as they do such a pedigree of Reformed and Evangelical wisdom, albeit from out-with the immediate Scottish context.

Paul Tillich (1886-1965), the German-American theologian, strove to use the symbols of Christian faith and revelation to answer the problems of human existence of his time. His existentialist process grounds all enquiry in the ways that human beings know, or understand,

²⁰³ Gerrish, 15.

²⁰⁴ See p.5 above.

themselves, in terms of the questions of their own existence. This process is particularly meaningful in any conversation around human relationships. Tillich discusses the idea of “love”, in Christ and as shared between human beings, as the basis for experiencing meaning and the reconciliation that ends estrangement from self, other and God. In the same vein, Tillich also discusses the idea of “morality” at great depth; an issue crucial to Christian conversations around human sexuality and relationship ethics. In particular, he makes a stark distinction between “moralism” and “morality”, arguing that the former is to do with Law, whereas the latter is to do with grace. This offers a timely and pertinent distinction in our present situation. It is my fervent belief that Tillich’s methodology, when applied to the enquiry of this dissertation, and ongoing denominational discussion, can offer a liberative way forward. My hope is that the Reformed Church in Scotland will be enabled to move into wholeness, health and maturity, as we continue to discuss and engage with the issues of marriage and sexual relationships.

Tillich's ideas link closely to the vision of James B Nelson (b.1930), whose ground breaking 1978 work *Embodiment*²⁰⁵ offered a vision of Christian sexual relationships which, for its time, was radical. Nelson engaged with the theology of relationships in a way that made integral the deep sense of estrangement discussed by Tillich, and understood intimate relationships to be part of the reconciliation of Self to Self, Other and God. Nelson framed this new vision of Christian relationships in terms of “means of knowing”, in clear parallel to the existentialist approach of Tillich.

Michael Vasey (1946-1998), was both a self-identified evangelical Church of England priest, and an academic. In *Strangers and Friends*,²⁰⁶ he comprehensively tracks the effect of economic shifts over the past few hundred years in Europe on the formulation and focus of marriage and the family. Included in his analysis of these shifts is a discussion of the development of the free-market and Capitalism, and of gay identity. Crucially, Vasey centres the Christian-ethical focus onto “New Kingdom Values”, as we seek to discern the will of God in our human, sexual relationships. I believe that this is the ultimate goal of any Christian ethical or moral enquiry, and absolutely central to this enquiry around Marriage.

²⁰⁵ James B Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Augsberg, Minneapolis 1978.

²⁰⁶ Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible*. Hodder & Stoughton, London 1995.

Questions and issues to be addressed

In the introduction to this dissertation I asked: What (marital-type) relationships exist within the Scottish Synod of the URC? How does the Synod respond to these relationships? What do we mean by marriage? Is our current position congruent with our tradition? Where do we need to update or revise our position?

In Chapter 1, the following issues emerged as key: companionship and mutuality, as the greatest good of marriage; control over sexual behaviour and the containment of sexual sin; procreation; Creation Ordinance and Covenant; the position of women; homosexuality and same-sex marriage; divorce; adultery; cohabitation and sex out-with marriage; monogamy. Further, the question was raised of whether marriage was more rightly a matter for the Church or the State.

In Chapter 2, I asked whether the perspectives of the leaders of the URC in Scotland differed in any ways from the “founding-parents” of the Reformed Tradition, and what had led to this development. I also asked whether there were any differences between the perspectives of the leaders of the URC in Scotland and the lay-members of the Synod, and whether there was any tension of perspective between those with formal theological education, and those lay people whose consensus (or lack thereof) governs the direction of the Synod, as voting members.

Through my field research, the following key issues emerged, congruent with those of the historical survey of Chapter 1: the primacy of companionship; sex out-with marriage, and concerns over “casual” sex or promiscuity *versus* sex within long term, committed relationships; Covenant and Creation Ordinance; gender roles within marriage; Civil Partnership and same-sex marriage; divorce; adultery and fidelity; monogamy. Further, participants discussed their views on what constituted a marriage, and what (if any) the role of the Church and its clergy should be in marriage.

How do we approach the question of marriage?

The question of *what marriage is*, or what we mean today in the Church when we use the term, cannot fully be answered by a historical survey. Certainly, we must utilise the teachings of the Bible around morality and love, and the criteria of “goods” of marriage, as set out by the great Reformed theologians of history. However, in twenty-first century Scotland, these

are not the only means of discerning God's will that we have available to us. In addition, we have access to biological science, psychological and sociological insights, and the power of our own, God given, rationale and reason. Today we understand human sexuality through lenses not available to our ancestors, and have been affected profoundly by changes in economics and the effect this has had on how we understand the family unit. As Christians we understand the Holy Spirit to be working in and through all things, not simply confined to historical revelation. The use of reason must not be dismissed as a "liberal" side-stepping of sound scriptural or theological grounding. Neither must the process of exegesis of the human situation as we observe it around us. Rather, it is crucial that twenty-first century Christians pair a sound understanding of Scripture and tradition with deep theological reflection upon the ways that God is moving in the culture around us, and revealing God's-self through science, psychology and sociology.

What is marriage?

Respondents in my field research expressed varying opinions on the question of what marriage is. Many felt that any long-term, committed, sexual relationship was, essentially, a marriage. Others questioned the relevance of the institution in today's society. Some spoke only of the usefulness of the legal protection provided by marriage and Civil Partnership. It was also observed that it cannot be the wedding ceremony that makes a marriage, rather the life that is built together. However, participants did believe that marriage, however we define it, still seems to be the central model of long-term relationship in our society, and something that couples, of all orientations, seem still to be drawn to. Some felt that it is seen as a milestone of adulthood, but not one that young people want to enter into too soon, perhaps (at least in part) due to the diminished pressure to do so and to the advances in contraception.

It was also argued by some that marriage has been unhelpfully glorified, perhaps even created into something of an idol, by both Church and society. With its historical (and biblical) links to the classification of women as property, and its historical status as (arguably) a mode of social control, some participants argued that the perpetuation of an ideology marriage (as we know it) as being divinely ordained by God, was deeply problematic.

Marriage must be seen as a symbol, particularly when it is framed within the language of Covenant. Tillich defined a symbol as being simply something which stands for something

else, taking on the power and meaning of that in which it participates. Therefore, every symbol opens up a gateway to a new level of reality that could not be described or engaged with adequately with non-symbolic language.²⁰⁷ Symbols are, he claims, “independent of any empirical criticism.” Rather, they can “only die if the situation in which they have been created has passed.”²⁰⁸ However, Tillich urges caution. No matter its claims, religion, as a phenomenon, is innately ambiguous. Therefore any religious symbol, including marriage, may become idolatrous.²⁰⁹ In the current furore around the possibility of the introduction of same-sex marriage, it seems to me that the defense of “traditional” marriage may well have become deeply idolatrous. Further, under the terms offered by Tillich, we might do well to ask ourselves whether the situation in which marriage was created has progressed to such an extent, that we must also revise and update the models or frameworks within which we understand our human relationships, and the ways in which we can experience God through these.

Existentialism as an approach deals with the human experience of meaninglessness, loneliness and emptiness,²¹⁰ which Tillich designates as the experience of “finitude”. These experiences are the very things that lead us to seek out intimate relationships in the first place. Tillich links the awareness of finitude, and the estrangement a person experiences from them-self and from the world, with the experience of existential anxiety. The loneliness and emptiness of finitude are experienced by most human beings on some level, and it is this that compels us to seek communion in relationship, in order to heal that innate sense of estrangement. This compulsion brings with it a (moral) responsibility to manage both the great possibilities and pitfalls of engaging with another human being on an exhilaratingly intimate level, even whilst both partners continue to experience their own personal senses of that estrangement and anxiety.

Key to Tillich's understanding of Existentialism are the key Christian concepts of: “*Esse qua esse bonum est*” (being is good for its own sake, as in Creation); universal Fall (the process of change from the fundamental goodness of Creation to the estrangement from self that every living being experiences); and the possibility of salvation (identified by Tillich as healing or

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 66, 67.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 117, 118.

wholeness, in opposition to the disruptiveness of the Fall).²¹¹ Relating these concepts to marriage, we can substitute the following specific themes: the good in sexual relationships for their own sake (beauty, pleasure and the creative impulse); the fallen sense of estrangement from self, other and God that can result either in warped sexual relationships, or drive human beings towards reconciliation, through the sexual wholeness that can be experienced in intimate connection or communion. The pursuit and attainment of that wholeness and connection can be experienced as a healing that can, in turn, be experienced as salvation. Seen thus, Christianity is not about prohibitions and commands, any more than salvation is about the eternal improvement of human kind. Rather, it is the “message of a New Reality which makes the fulfilment of our essential being possible. Such being transcends all special prohibitions and commands by one law which is not law, namely love”.²¹²

Tillich argues that human beings are engaged in an ongoing struggle to get beyond each moment;²¹³ for Christians, this is an ongoing struggle to get beyond this world to the New Kingdom of God. Towards this end, a person is directed towards a concrete point of connection, whether a subject, content, person or thing, and this connection is manifested in love, *eros*, or *agape*. Within this understanding, Tillich believes that human kind exists within a state of existential self-estrangement, continually struggling to leave that state of estrangement, through the acceptance of Christ, and progress towards the New Kingdom.²¹⁴ Therefore, if the Christian message offers a way of breaking through the existential conflict of estrangement (specifically from God, but consequently from Self and Other), then this can only be experienced through a sense of relational participation.

If love is, as Tillich argues, the reunion of the estranged,²¹⁵ then it is manifest most fully where it overcomes the greatest separation. Tillich argues that the place of greatest separation is the place of separation of Self from Self; estrangement. Love is, he states, an expression of the total participation of the being and, from this, Tillich argues that being in love offers the fulfilment of the desire for reunion; reconciliation.²¹⁶ The emotional element of love is its key mode of expression, through passion. As such, it is the state of being “driven towards reunion”. If estrangement, “the state of separation of those who belong together and are

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 118.

²¹² *Ibid*, 211.

²¹³ The classical concept of “concupiscence”.

²¹⁴ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 120.

²¹⁵ Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice*, 25.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 26, 27.

driven towards each other in love”,²¹⁷ is understood as separation from God, Other and Self, then it is love, by means of passion, that offers reconciliation. The passion that reconciles human beings to each other (and themselves) is the same passion that reconciles human-kind to God. Through this lens, the passion that leads to the love of marriage (however we define it), bringing reconnection with self and other, is intertwined with the love experienced in relationship with God, and mirrors the passion of God’s Covenant with humanity.

There are, however, different aspects to how we understand love. Sexual desire has traditionally been viewed as the lowest quality of love, identified with “sensual self-fulfilment”.²¹⁸ Yet Tillich argues that it has been wrong to understand the libido as being simply the desire for pleasure. Rather, it should be identified as being the natural striving of humankind towards that from which it has become separated. Pleasure naturally accompanies the fulfilment of these desires, but it is not this pleasure which fulfils the desire, rather the reunion; “fulfilled desire is pleasure, and unfulfilled desire is pain”.²¹⁹

James B Nelson goes further, arguing that the estrangement from God, Other and Self, described by Tillich, is the essence of sin, and that reconciliation is the manifestation of grace.²²⁰ Nelson asserts that the unnatural separation of mind from body leads to alienation, or estrangement; sin.²²¹ The ways in which we connect with Self, Other and God (“knowing”), are always linked to our ways of loving, which come as much from our bodies as they do from our minds.²²² Therefore, loving another person brings with it the potential for a deep, new dimension of knowledge, that could not have been found alone. Love and sexuality cannot be separated, because they are both “the impulse toward communion”; for this reason, Nelson describes sexuality as a “means of knowing.” This understanding is absolutely crucial to how we view loving sexual relationships between those who are not within a traditional marriage bond. Sexual desire, as discussed by Tillich, cannot simply be seen as the desire simply for hedonistic pleasure. Rather, it is the desire for deeper knowing, along with what Tillich called “the natural striving of humankind towards that to which it has become separated.” Viewed in this light, I would argue that we should see all healthy sexual relationships as being equally reflective of God’s Covenant, in as much as they are equally

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 28.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

²²⁰ Nelson, *Embodiment*, 70.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 93.

²²² *Ibid*, 95.

reconciliative. As human-kind is created in the image of God, our innate “will to communion” is part of our becoming all that we are created to be. It is the drive towards reconciliation from estrangement, realised through the actions of love.²²³

Nelson urges us to understand sex as a form of language.²²⁴ Doing so encourages us to view it as an expression of “the human search for meaning and belonging.” From this we are then able to ask questions of the nature and quality of personal communication that are intended in each relationship or encounter, the kind of communion they enable, and what their meaning is within the broader social context.²²⁵ If sex is a language of love, then it is also one form of the passion described by Tillich, and it is part of the language of the love that we are created for, in community and in communion. Even though our estrangement (sin) may at times lead to a distortion of the communication of love, the “image of God is never utterly destroyed. We never, even in our most ‘inhuman’ moments, lose the need and the desire for love.”²²⁶

Love is the process and the reality of communion, the reunion with God, neighbour and self. Again echoing again Tillich, Nelson describes love as:

[the] moving power of life... which derives everything that is towards the unity of the separated... the power of love is not something which is added to an otherwise finished process, but life has love in itself as one of its constitutive elements. It is the fulfilment and the triumph of love that is able to reunite the most radically separated beings, namely individual persons.²²⁷

Love requires commitment, risk and trust. Its *agape* qualities are those of giving and openness. Its *eros* quality is that of the desire to receive what the other gives of them-self, with an expectation of enrichment and surprise. Love respects individual identity, and is a communion with the other, which can open up a channel to communion with God.²²⁸

²²³ *Ibid*, 104.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 106. We must be clear however, that distortions of sex as an abusive tool of power, such as rape or other abuses, should not be seen in any way as “communications of love”. Rather, we would see “distortions of the communication of love” in the sorts of intimate relationships that do not feed us emotionally, or lead us towards the sort of relationship that can embody any kind of reconciliative or covenantal properties.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 109, 110.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 117, 118.

Marriage, then, has emerged “out of [the] cauldron of interpretations, [as the] proper context for romantic love”²²⁹ in our society. “Good” desire has come to be defined as the love of a betrothed man and woman. However, Michael Vasey argues that a classical understanding of desire, where romantic love is viewed as “an intuition of beauty, a moment of revelation both about God and about creation”, then we might be better placed to understand God’s gift and calling to us, in human relationships. Emotions could be seen as spiritual awakenings, leading us to a healthy and active engagement with creation, which is one form of worship. An appropriate response to this sort of experience might well be marriage, but equally so friendship, or various sorts of “affectionate sexual relationship”. As Vasey argues:

[the] “discernment of what outcome is appropriate cannot lie with the experience of romantic love itself; it must be discovered within creation and within responsible and affectionate society.”²³⁰

The traditional goods of reformed marriage

In Chapter 1, we saw that Luther, Calvin, the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Karl Barth, the founding fathers and core theologians of the reformed tradition, all placed companionship as the greatest good of marriage, followed by the containment of sexual sin, and procreation. Barth in took the idea of companionship further, expanding it to encompass mutuality, interrelatedness and synergy, wholeness. In a similar vein, Christopher Ash uses the language of self-actualisation (although he does not place it as the highest good of marriage), whereas Mark Driscoll prioritises friendship.

Control over sexual behaviour, including the containment of sexual sin, was seen as a secondary good of Reformed marriage in the sixteenth century. This was largely due to the determination of Reformers to tackle the problem of secret relationships and the failure of celibacy amongst clergy, in the Roman Catholic Church.²³¹ In Scotland, this focus tended to lead to a blurring of the lines between Church and state courts, and strict, humiliating punishments for those who transgressed laws around pre- or extra-marital sex.²³² Sexual sin was seen as a direct result of the Fall, and it was considered a Christian imperative to seek out

²²⁹ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 236.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* 236.

²³¹ Radford Reuther, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 73-75 & Methuen, *A Perspective on the History of Marriage*, 3.

²³² Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 5.

godly relationships that could naturally contain the fallen human imperative to sexual sin, and model the covenant relationship between God and God's people.

Within the Reformed Tradition, procreation has tended to be listed as a tertiary good of marriage. However, Christopher Ash, writing in the early twenty-first century, cites it as foremost, echoing the perspective of many Christians today. In part, as was made explicit in the Westminster Confession of Faith, this tertiary good was linked to the desire to further populate the Church, a motivation which, in today's over-populated world, might be more properly addressed through evangelism than any procreational imperative for Christians.

Nonetheless, the Reformation ideal of the "Protestant married household"²³³ continues to be prevalent within the Reformed tradition, and the ideas of masculinity and family espoused by Mark Driscoll to some extent echo this concept. Marriage, and the family, or household, has continued to be a significant aspect of the economic, moral and social ordering of the Western world, reflected in tax and welfare provisions, and on-going cultural expectations. What has begun to change, however, is the make-up of these families, and indeed of the marital-type relationships that make up these households.

For the members and friends of the URC in Scotland who participated in my field research, partnership, commitment, respect, love, support, companionship, rejoicing in each other's gifts, and the sharing of adversity were the most important goods of marriage, in their minds. They also emphasised the quality and depth of a relationship, and the primacy of love and respect within that relationship, as the underpinning values of sexual morality for Christians. No one explicitly identified the containment of sexual sin as a good of marriage, although many subjects expressed concern over the idea of "promiscuity" or "casual sex". It was generally felt that long term, committed relationships were the better place for sexual relationships to exist, whether or not the two people involved were married, and no matter their gender. Parallel to this concern was the suggestion that long-term, committed relationships could rightly be called, or at least viewed, in the same terms as marriage; a perspective that echoes that of Christopher Ash. However, these perspectives are not quite the same as viewing "marital-type" relationships as places for the containment of sexual sin.

²³³ Roper, *Sex, Marriage, and the Church*, 17,18.

Rather, they are viewing sex in a modern, positive way, but expressing a preference for commitment and longevity in the relationships within which that sex occurs.

Similarly, no one who took part in my research offered the opinion that procreation was a good of marriage. One interviewee spoke powerfully about the emotional damage that this perspective had caused to himself and his wife, who had been unable to conceive children. Since procreation has tended to be one of the key arguments used against the validity of same-sex relationships, it is particularly significant to recognise that this has never been viewed as the primary good of Reformed marriage. It is no longer a culturally crucial motif (with evangelism having taken over as the prime means of the increase of the Church), and does not figure as important to the members and clergy of the URC in Scotland.

Michael Vasey backs up the emphasis of the Reformers, championing friendship over competition, as a sound basis for a “healthy society”. Vasey offers a vision of a society based on New Kingdom values, and in doing so to some extent echoes the city-society aspirations of the early Reformers. This sort of society, Vasey argues, would nurture affectionate and loyal relationships, and would surely be naturally inclined to encompass and bless all relationships based on friendship within it, regardless of the gender composition of those relationships.²³⁴

Tillich would also underscore the primacy of companionship in a marital relationship, with his argument that human joy comes most truly from the sort of mutuality and companionship that rejoices in the Other. This form of connection is never about pleasure simply for its own sake, nor is it simply about finding an Other who can protect us from pain.²³⁵ Rather, it is a human partnership that is about true engagement with the true nature of both Self and Other. This form of engagement, he states, is the fulfilment of our true natures as humans, and leads to a joy that is “born out of union with reality itself.”²³⁶ However, Tillich cautions that this form of fulfilling engagement will not necessarily be the route we take, as humans. Instead, the innate feeling of boredom and emptiness that comes from the sense of estrangement that human beings have from Self, Other and God, can tend to result in our craving pleasure in

²³⁴ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 185.

²³⁵ Paul Tillich, *The New Being: The New Being as Love, The New Being as Freedom, The New Being as Fulfilment*. SCM Press, London 1959, 146.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

ways that only serve to increase that sense of estrangement and emptiness. We can be left struggling to relate fully to things or meanings, Self or Other.²³⁷

If we interpret this idea of estrangement from Self, the Other and Creation, or God, as “sin”, then we can see sin in the objectification of the Other. This objectification is a particular risk in an industrial, capitalist society such as our own, where all people are drawn into the cycle of production and consumption, forcing us to become both consumers and units for consumption, on an open market. The consequence of separation from God (sin) is the lack of joy, as born out in the narrative of the characters of the Hebrew scriptures. In the same vein, reunion with God results in the experience of joy (reconciliation).²³⁸ However, Tillich also points to the inner conflict experienced by Christians about the acceptance or rejection of joy, often linked to an over-dependence on rigid or constricting dogma. He argues that Christians can tend to be somewhat suspicious of the gifts of creation which contribute to joy, particularly where those gifts are manifest through human creativity, including the creativity of sexuality.²³⁹ As a consequence, many Christians try to avoid intense experiences of joy, or feel shame about those experiences they enjoy.

For Tillich, such shame, coupled with anxiety or the fear of condemnation, can lead Christians towards unhelpful, judgemental pronouncements on morality. However, these sorts of pronouncements do not appease the underlying anxiety, which remains in the background, resulting in something of a vicious circle, as the anxiety, paired with judgemental moralism, creates a sense of moral despair.²⁴⁰ This is certainly the situation we can see in evidence in our contemporary debate about marriage and relationships in the twenty-first century. Anxiety and guilt are brought about by moralism that is not based upon the transforming and liberating love of Christ, and are transformed into unnecessarily negative judgements, overly moral demands and self-satisfaction; these in turn bring about deeper moral despair. Rather than approaching the ever-changing horizon of marriage and relationships with open minds, infused by the Spirit, we are tempted, as a Church, to lay claim to a perplexing mix of historic symbols, over-layed upon the symbols of the Enlightenment and Industrial revolution, as eternal; an idolatrous act feeding the estrangement we so long to end.

²³⁷ *Ibid* 146.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 142.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 143.

²⁴⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*. Yale Note Bene, New Haven 2000, 52, 53.

Perhaps this perspective upon sin and estrangement could lead to the very conclusion made by the Reformers. Marriage thus viewed offers a means to protect its participants from the sorts of sexual behaviours that can result from the awareness of estrangement, and the cycle of consumption and objectification. Yet, when marriage is linked to notions of moralism, and bound up in rigid dogma, it runs the risk of increasing estrangement, with the anxiety, guilt and moral despair that this brings with it. Therefore, if we are to acknowledge the containment of sexual sin as being in any way a valid good of marriage, I believe that we must radically broaden what we mean by marriage, to include all committed, intimate relationships. Only then can we begin to address the ways in which estrangement, or sin, can best be addressed or minimised within healthy relationships.

If over-reliance on dogmatic understandings of marriage risk leading us further into sin, or estrangement, then it may be helpful to turn to Tillich's narrative of morality over moralism. Within this framework, we can be freed from understanding marriage in ways bound by times that are not our own, and begin to formulate theologies of (sexual) relationships that focus on the healing of the estrangement from Self, Other and God, understanding this to be every bit as much a "containment of sexual sin", yet phrased in the language of our own time, and far more helpfully drawing in the myriad forms of relationships that exist within our midst. Further, this approach allows us to investigate theologically the ways in which healthy sexual relationships can be part of the healing of that estrangement, and dismiss historical notions of "unrespectability" or "moral-bankruptcy" that have been attached to sexual relationships outside with the narrow, heteronormative model that continues to exist.

Economic changes have had a profound effect on our perspectives in this matter, particularly in relation to the Industrial Revolution and the advent of capitalism. These developments are particularly crucial when we critique the perspectives of Reformers such as Luther and Calvin. Vasey argues that Luther's imperative for the increase and preservation of humankind, was based on the belief that it was ordained by God for the preservation of home and state.²⁴¹ The "family-household" was viewed as a kind of city in miniature, as it had been in Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures. This model still had clear economic relevance in sixteenth century Europe. However, the Industrial Revolution and subsequent development of capitalism, changed forever the constitution, parameters and meaning of the family-

²⁴¹ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 30.

household, and we must be very cautious about over-laying either the biblical or sixteenth century theological models onto today's context.

Vasey also addresses the perspective that sexual acts which do not include the possibility of conception are “sins against nature.”²⁴² He speaks of Aquinas’ historical identification of four “sins against nature”: bestiality, homosexual sex, any non-procreative heterosexual sex and masturbation. Aquinas identified these four categories as being innately sins not only against nature, but also (and as such) against God, and as far more serious than any sin against another person, and therefore more serious than the sins of adultery, seduction or rape.²⁴³ Yet, as Vasey points out, the modern day understanding of “nature” and what is “natural” has changed enormously since the time of Aquinas. Indeed, the Reformers were at pains to move Christian thinking away from any notions of the mystical properties of fertility, including as that would relate to the idea of “spilled seed”. Therefore, this approach to viewing ideas of sexual sin ought to have no place in Reformed thinking; rather, the Reformed focus is more appropriately on the values of the New Kingdom, and how these values can be lived out within human relationships.

Creation ordinance and covenant

Martin Luther taught that marriage had been given to humanity by God at the point of creation, and was the foundation for the structure of society, although he also believed that sexual desire (as well as the subjugation of women) was a result of the Fall. Because of this, Luther (echoing Augustine and others) believed that sexual activity polluted the body, keeping the human body from being able to embody any sort of holiness. Marriage could only contain those urges, not redeem the body from their pollution; only Christ could offer redemption, through his grace. Therefore, the Creation Ordinance of marriage was both a matter of (sexual) control, and one of the greater plan for the promulgation of the Church.

Although Luther had not linked the marital relationship with God’s covenantal relationship with Israel,²⁴⁴ this concept became doctrinal in the writing of Calvin. Because of this the so-

²⁴² *Ibid*, 43.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 44.

²⁴⁴ In particular, Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14-16.

called “covenant of marriage” came to be considered superior to any other human contract.²⁴⁵ Knox understood marriage in much the same way, as did the Westminster Confession of Faith. As we have seen, the idea of Covenant has been central to the development of Reformed theology in Scotland. The idea that God's relationship to humanity is bound by the Covenant, and that this profound relationship is reflected in marriage is not, as we have seen, a universally accepted connection. Gillespie's idea of Covenant of Grace could be connected to the grace a couple experience in the love that they find in each other, and the synergy that comes from their union. However, as we discussed in Chapter 1,²⁴⁶ there are some deep theological problems with linking the Covenant of God to humanity, to the contract or promise made between two adults who marry.

If, as Luther taught, there can be no innately redemptive qualities or sacramental properties in marriage, then it cannot be considered strictly covenantal, in the terms that covenantal theology has traditionally been understood. However, as discussed by Barth, the mutuality experienced within marriage, with Christ, spouse and humanity, brings with it a transformational freedom that is, indeed, a form of redemption. Paul Tillich and James B Nelson have taken this idea of mutuality further. Not limiting their scope simply to the married relationship, they both offer a vision of sexual, or loving, intimacy, as offering the transformation of reconciliation with Self, Other and God, from the estrangement that leads to anxiety, guilt and moral despair. It is only through a broadened perspective of marriage, or through the letting go of that language, and focusing instead on the values and attributes contained within the concept, that we may be able to rightly reclaim the idea of Covenant for marriage. Once we are able to acknowledge the ways in which human beings can experience God, through relationships with others, out-with enforced delineation or restriction, can we begin to see a Creation Ordinance that is to love, connection and relationship, and transformative as it finds fruition.

Following on from this, the idea that marriage (or any sexual relationship) must be between male and female, based on the idea that male and female reflect the relationship between God and God's people, or the relationship between Christ and His community, is deeply problematic. If, as Barth argued, that Covenantal relationship can only be understood in terms of otherness, there should be no reason why that “otherness” cannot exist between any two

²⁴⁵ Comm. Gen. 19:4-9; Comm. Harm. Law Ex. 22:19, Lev. 18:22, 20:13-16, Deut. 27:16; Serm. Deut. 22:13-24.

²⁴⁶ See above, in pages 29-31.

people, no matter their gender. Modern psychology, along with simple observation, would impress upon us the fact that human beings have as many overlaps as they have differences. Gender is simply one of these areas, and is far more complicated than simple biology. Further, our theological tradition does not teach a God who is limited by (any) gender, and the scriptures offer metaphors for the Lord that include the use of both gender pronouns, and none. Therefore, the idea of mutuality and complementarity, as it relates to Covenant, must be nuanced, matrixed and flexible; we experience “otherness”, and are offered levels of reconciliation, in every encounter, and must not allow our understanding of God’s relationship with humanity to be limited unnaturally by time-bound perspectives on gender or human relationships.

In much the same way, we cannot view “sexual sin” as a breach of God’s Covenant with humanity (as suggested by Torrance), unless we substitute the language of “sexual sin” for that of “estrangement”. The sense of estrangement from Self, Other and God, described by Tillich, which may find some healing and reconciliation through healthy, sexual relationships, will be perpetuated as long as human beings are guided into relationships that are not appropriate for them, encouraged to stay in relationships that are damaging for them, or remain unable to enjoy the fullness of the relationships that they are in, due to moralistic anxiety or guilt. Conversely, the Covenantal transformation of reconciliation, with Self, Other and God, experienced in right relationships, should be seen, in every way, as the calling and gift of grace described by Torrance.

Within these terms, understanding God’s Creation Ordinance as being to love, connection and relationship, and understanding God’s transformational Covenant as existing within the reconciliation experienced through right relationship, it becomes impossible to argue that marriage *can* be redefined or attacked, as was the concern of Christopher Ash and Mark Driscoll. Rather, the very universality of the Creation Order, to which Ash refers, must override any unnaturally narrow or controlling framework being over-laid upon human relationships. Whether we use the language of marriage, or that of love, mutuality and commitment, the essence of that concept must be rooted in the transformational Covenant of God, through Christ. If marriage, or partnership, as they have been practiced at any point in history, fail to reflect these values, only *then* has a redefinition or degradation taken place.

As discussed in Chapter 2²⁴⁷, in interview, the ministers and leaders of the URC in Scotland held varying perspectives around the use of Creation Ordinance and Covenantal language. One argued that love should be considered as being rather radical. It should not be thought of as a “wishy-washy” concept, but rather that it is vast, of God, and therefore powerful. This love, which is, I would argue, the sole essence of the Creation Ordinance, cannot therefore be viewed as a soft option. Rather, it may even be regarded as prophetic, revelatory or liberative. Perhaps, then, this sort of love, when manifest in committed, human relationships, should always be considered within the Christian delineation of “marriage”, no matter the parameters of state law or tradition.

Of course, this perspective of Creation Ordinance is *not* what was specifically meant by the Reformers, although they might not disagree with the essence that has been distilled. However, it does broadly reflect the mood of the Scottish Synod, as expressed in my field research, who tended to be uncomfortable with the idea of the intricacies of marriage, as we know it today, as being ordained by God. Rather, they resonated more with the idea that loving relationships can be a “hint of Heaven”, that sex can be the highest expression of self-giving, that God does not want us to be alone, and that human beings should be freed into having relationships with quality and depth, no matter whether these relationships lead officially into marriage.

Key Issues of Marriage

Women and Gender

The cultural context inherited by the Reformers was one in which women tended to be viewed as property, and this perspective was echoed in pronouncements around the subordination of women. The Reformers and later Reformed theologians did teach the spiritual equality of women; however, they emphasised that men and women held differing roles. In particular, Barth taught that any perceived pre-eminence of males must be understood to be a purely human imperative, and not one that had been ordained by God.²⁴⁸ Rather, Barth believed, at least intellectually, that any difference between male and female should be understood in terms of complementarity, not superiority or inferiority.

²⁴⁷ See above, in pages 58-62.

²⁴⁸ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 170.

Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage

Barth, Torrance and others have argued that homosexual relationships are clearly forbidden by scripture, and go against the order created by God, echoing the “sins against nature” described by Aquinas. Further, they have argued that within homosexual relationships, complementarity, and with it wholeness in relationship, are impossible. However, Steve Chalke, English Baptist minister, amongst a growing tide of Christians, have begun to rethink this stance. Many mainstream churches, including in particular Edinburgh's Augustine United URC, have a thriving lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population, and offer an inclusive, affirming ministry. Like Chalke, the URC in Scotland has held strongly to the principles of justice and reconciliation, and wrestled with the many issues of inclusion.

In the secondary congregational survey carried out within the Scottish Synod, it was interesting to find that one out of the ten respondents identified as homosexual; the national estimate being widely considered to be around 3%. Further, 7% of those who responded to the Survey Monkey questionnaire identified as homosexual. 3% of respondents lived with a long term same-sex partner, and 9% of respondents had an adult child who was homosexual. Of course, numbers were small for these sample groups, but the findings remain an important reminder that “ordinary congregations” within the URC in Scotland are diverse, and assumptions should not be made about the sorts of people and relationships that are contained within them.

It was also very interesting to note that only half of the congregational respondents believed that marriage should be for both opposite and same-sex couples.²⁴⁹ For some, this was due to their feeling that Civil Partnership should be enough of an option. For others, this was due to their feeling that gay people *wanted* to be understood as different to straight people. However, a clear majority of respondents had no problem with the idea that Christians might be homosexual.

²⁴⁹ See also: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/press_release/do_christians_really_oppose_gay_marriage, and Linda Woodhead “What People Really think about Same-Sex Marriage” in *Modern Believing*, Vol. 55/1, pp.27–38 for the interesting results of a 2013 YouGov poll that indicated that more members of Christian churches in the UK believe that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry than do not, and over 33% believed that same-sex marriage was “right”, despite what has been said in the media and been presented to Parliament as fact.

Most respondents to the Survey Monkey were comfortable with the idea of homosexuality for Christians, although a significant number remained unsure. As with those who undertook the congregational survey, respondents were more concerned with relationships being long-term and committed, than with the gender make-up of those relationships. In contrast to those in the sample URC congregation, however, the clear majority of those undertaking the on-line survey believed that marriage should be for both same sex and opposite sex couples.

In one-to-one interviews, there were many subjects who felt that Civil Partnership should be as available to opposite-sex couples as marriage should be to same-sex couples. There was also confusion expressed about what exactly the difference was between the two options, and this led to interesting conversations about the weight we put on the word “marriage”. Subjects acknowledged the emotional weight that the word hold in people's heads and hearts, and that marriage is clearly about more than simply law. For this reason, there were concerns that Civil Partnership can stigmatise relationships, setting them as less meaningful than those which can be solemnised within marriage. As one retired URC minister stated, echoing the sentiments of Tillich: “Civil Partnership is about law, but marriage is about grace.”

Another URC minister suggested that, just as, within the span of his own ministry, Protestant-Catholic marriages, and marriages between people who had been divorced, living together or had children, had gone from being taboo to quite ordinary, he expected the same acceptance to evolve for same-sex marriages. Another felt excited about the opportunity for Christians to begin to be part of the kind of redefinition of marriage that could realign it with a Covenant of love, and correct some of the issues around gender that have become bound up in the model of marriage we currently have. Further, marriage could be freed to become solely about healthy relationships, and this could be far more beneficial for society than the current model.

Engaging with modern scholarship that offers revised ways of understanding scriptural passages that have traditionally been used to condemn homosexuality, those who were interviewed focused on Jesus' emphasis on love. One subject commented:

I celebrate love wherever I find it; it's a contradiction to the fractured nature of so many relationships... What saves our young and old alike is the expression of committed, self-giving love. I cannot help but think there is joy in Heaven over love expressed.

There was a strong commitment to taking responsibility for understanding the contexts within which the Bible was written, and not trying to make direct mappings to our contemporary situation. Parallels were also made to the ways that the Bible has been used in the past to support slavery or suppress women; a point made strongly also by Steve Chalke.

Michael Vasey discusses how, in the early eighteenth century, society began to organise around the domestic ideal in different ways than it had previously, due to the emergence of capitalism. Personal freedom began to be valued in a way it had not been previously, and both religious expression (evidenced in the rise of evangelicalism) and social relationships began to be restructured around a model of a free and competitive market.²⁵⁰ This had a fundamental influence both on personal expectations, and the way in which personal realities are perceived. Individuals, and the family units they formed, became competing parts of the market in their own right.²⁵¹ This, in turn, created the climate where, by the twentieth century, there was space for gay subcultures to emerge, as individuals (and same-sex partners) were able to own property in their own right, and make market-significant choices. The emerging dominance of the free market model then played its own part in the political and social restructuring of society, radically changing the nature of the sorts of social bonds that had once been the fabric of society. This, in turn, facilitated the emergence of what Vasey calls a “public gay identity”.

In the nineteenth century, the discoveries and developments of science had an enormous effect upon culture. This was also integrally linked with the development of the free market, as the Industrial Revolution transformed the ways in which human beings understood both themselves and the world they lived in. Competition has become the primary model for economic life in our culture, and human desire is a significant market force. Vasey argues that the emergence of gay identity, as we now know it, is an irreversible consequence of these developments.²⁵² However, Vasey takes care to correct any idea that gay people’s lives are somehow dominated by (sexual) desire, compared to their straight counterparts. Rather, it is simply the social visibility of gay people in this one aspect of their beings that may have

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 96.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 96-98.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 111.

created this impression.²⁵³ One consequence of this perceived imbalance is a resultant lack of support towards moving beyond this somewhat immature stage of relational development.

It has been reflected in the comments of those who took part in my field research that there is today a far greater acceptance of same-sex attraction and relationships. This is due both to developments in the scientific understanding of sexuality, and to the increase in visibility of gay people, which is, in turn, partly due to the political and economic changes of the early twentieth century. Perhaps, in this climate, legislation around same-sex marriage becomes inevitable; gay people today have considerable economic and political power, as players in the free-market, and cannot be side-lined indefinitely. However, the deeper Christian question must be around “what constitutes a marriage?” Following from our discussion of that question, on pages 74-79, there follows no obvious theological reason to bar those in same-sex partnerships from marriage. However, the role of the Church in marriage (of any sort) also bears further conversation, as we shall see below (pp. 98-99).

Adultery, Infidelity and Divorce

Subjects interviewed described adultery in terms of infidelity, and were inclined to view it as being something beyond just a sexual act that transgresses the covenanted understanding between two people. Some were inclined to categorise as adultery any emotional closeness, that might represent intimacy, withdrawn from a partner and offered to another. Several focused on trust, which could be betrayed in many ways, including not only other relationships, but through behaviour such as secret gambling, drinking, violence or illegal activities. It was acknowledged that the betrayal of sexual intimacy can often feel like the greatest betrayal of all, but suggested that dishonesty or deception is likely to be the most common form of infidelity.

Interview subjects defined the idea of infidelity very broadly, and they tended to use that term, rather than the term “adultery”. That might alert us to the fact that the seventh Commandment refers to marriages that are very different to those we know today.²⁵⁴ Marriages at the time of the formulation of the Ten Commandments were unlikely to be last for the time that they might today, simply due to the far higher mortality rates of that time. Neither were they necessarily monogamous; the Old Testament accounts often witness to men as having several

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 107.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 28.

wives and concubines. Hebrew laws concerning marriage were not based upon any presupposition that marriage was the only appropriate context within which men should have sex. Further, as Vasey argues, it is only in the modern period that consent has been assumed to be a requirement for marriage; Deuteronomy 22:28,29 rules that, if a man rapes an unbetrothed woman, he must marry her, and loses the right to divorce her.²⁵⁵

The pre-Reformation Church in Scotland had allowed divorce on the grounds of adultery, non-consummation or cruelty. Following the Reformation, only adultery was allowed as a ground, eventually expanded to include desertion. Later Reformed writers have argued that, as God does not divorce his people, Christians sworn to covenants of marriage should not expect to be allowed to divorce a spouse, unless there were very serious factors, that made the marriage untenable.

In interviews, subjects showed compassionate understanding of the difficulties and sadness of divorce, acknowledging that sometimes it was absolutely essential. Only one had been divorced himself, but others had parents, siblings or children who were themselves divorced. They expressed concern around the importance of the protection of women, particularly those who found themselves in abusive marriages, and felt confident that lives can be rebuilt after divorce. There was also agreement around how badly the Church has tended to cope with divorce, with several commenting that the Church has often failed people during some of the most difficult times of their lives.

Cohabitation and Sex Out-with Marriage²⁵⁶

As we have seen in Chapter 1, the practice of “irregular marriage” has been part of the reality of the Scottish experience since long before the Reformation. In recent years, cohabitation has become ever more common, with the majority of couples in Scotland living together before they marry. Of those surveyed within a congregational setting, there was a clear generational difference evident; none of those who were married and over sixty years old had

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

²⁵⁶ The concepts of “promiscuity” and “casual sex” have come up consistently amongst older participants of my field work. It would be an interesting future piece of work to investigate further how these terms are defined by older people, and why they find them so challenging. A comparison between the understanding and lived experience of people of a range of ages could prove particularly fruitful.

lived with their partner before marriage. However, some reported having children or grandchildren who lived with a partner.

Of those who took part in the secondary survey, 70% believed that sex out-with marriage was acceptable for Christians. However, they were clear in their preference that sex should only be within a long term, committed relationship, and expressed some concerns about the idea of “promiscuity” or “casual relationships”. It was important to respondents that Christians should take sexual relationships seriously, and approach it with respect, love, commitment and faithfulness. They saw the value, of having gained some sexual experience before marriage.

Similarly, respondents of the Survey Monkey questionnaire were more likely to have adult children or grandchildren cohabiting, than having done so themselves. Yet, as with the respondents of the congregational surveys, the clear majority did believe that sex out-with marriage is perfectly acceptable for Christians, as long as it is within a long term, committed relationship. Those interviewed one-to-one felt much the same, and it was noted that there are not many churches these days where there are not folk in membership who are in sexual relationships outside marriage, including some in positions of leadership.

This development was seen by subjects as being strongly indicative of changes in social *mores* over the last forty years. However, the prevalence of cohabitation does not appear to have resulted in the ministers of the Scottish Synod celebrating fewer marriages. They felt that cohabitation was simply the modern path to marriage, and that the impulse to getting married has not lessened. One subject suggested that the reason for this might be that marriage is seen as something of a milestone of adulthood. Because of this, he anticipated that, if marriage is introduced for same-sex couples, within twenty to thirty years time, the same benchmark would become the norm for gay people also.

It was also noted that contraceptives have had a huge impact on our views on sex before marriage, in that the consequences or risks of pregnancy from sex are so drastically reduced from those of previous years. Yet this reduction of sexual consequences appears to fuel the concern felt by some about “recreational sex”, where partners may use each other in shallow ways, or give up their bodies without adequate commitment to their partner. This brought with it an issue of power, particularly for younger people, whose emotional maturity may not

yet be ready to cope with a complex matrix of feelings and choices, that could lead to them committing to the wrong person at a young age.

The Role of the Church in Marriage

Reformers have held a spectrum of opinions, when it comes to the nature of the role of the Church in marriage. Luther believed that a marriage existed simply from the point the couple decided it did, regardless of any official ceremony, and should be administered legally by the State, not the Church. However, Calvin believed that Church and State should be intrinsically linked, and this included the administration of marriage. Barth acknowledged that there was no biblical imperative for marriage taking the form it currently does, but felt that it was important for the State to validate marriage.

Ministers interviewed were not unhappy with the idea of the role of registrar being taken from them, kept only for the State. Some felt that legislation was not a role into which ministers had been called, just as Jesus had not involved himself in legislation. If, as Tillich suggests, Law should be linked to the negative aspects of moralism, then perhaps acting as agents of the State, for the institution of marriage, cannot be viewed as an act of grace.

When the Church is acting on behalf of the State, there may be what Tillich calls a “problem of split authority”. When there is a split in authority, who should decide which authority is the correct one; the Church’s or the State’s? Could this split result in the end of authority, or be part of the perceived attack on marriage? Splits, such as that between Church and State over the question of same-sex marriage, inevitably lead to conflicts of conscience, which make right decision making very difficult for Christians. Tillich argues that:

as finite beings we must act as if we were infinite, and since this is impossible, we are driven into complete insecurity, anxiety and despair.²⁵⁷

Unable to withstand the burden of the loneliness experienced in this situation, we are tempted to subject ourselves to just one authority, suppressing the fact that there are other potentially authoritative positions or claims. This unwillingness to decide for ourselves can then be used by those in power (on either side of a split) to preserve their position or increase their power, to the detriment of the broader picture, holistic truth or dis-empowered stake holders.

²⁵⁷ Tillich, *The New Being*, 86.

Tillich argues that there is something inherently opposed to established authority within the Christian message and experience; something foundational that “revolts against subjection to even the greatest and holiest experiences of the past”.²⁵⁸ To this claim, Tillich cites Jesus’ refusal to state categorically whether baptism is of God or of man.²⁵⁹ Tillich urges that the authority of God, even as given to human kind, cannot be limited or parametered. It cannot be contained by legal, doctrinal or ritualistic dogma. Neither can it be derived. Rather, it must grasp us, and we must respond in participation with its power. Therefore “the question of authority never can get an ultimate answer”.²⁶⁰ Instead, Christians must strive passionately to point to a reality that cannot fully be grasped, just as Jesus did, but not as established authorities; a reality which, states Tillich, “breaks again and again through the established forms of … authority and through the hardened forms of our personal experiences”.²⁶¹

Nelson also discusses the relationship between institutions (such as the family, the church, economic organisations or government) and sexuality. He argues that these institutions socialise us into roles and modes of self-understanding that tend towards predictability and thereby serve the purposes of those institutions.²⁶² The coherence of this system has clear benefits for the stability of society. However, it must be challenged and transformed regularly, if its benefit is not quickly to become a deficit. Such must be the case with marriage; it will be perpetuated by the institutions of the family, the church and the government, for complementary yet (at times) competing reasons. However, if it is never challenged and transformed, it is robbed of its creative and life giving potential.

The Church must never be an agent of the State, and the Scottish Reformed churches have a strong legacy of resisting such a situation. However, willingness to act as a Registrar, for the purpose of marriage, must be left to the individual minister. The greater concern of the Church must be that of raising up young and old alike to establish healthy, nurturing relationships. Where these relationships become long-term and committed, it should, as a community, work to build up all its parts, and encourage its members to engage with the reconciliation that is offered in the love that is experienced.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 87.

²⁵⁹ Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-13, Luke 3:21,22.

²⁶⁰ Tillich, *The New Being*, 88.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 88.

²⁶² Nelson, *Embodiment*, 94.

Is our current position congruent with our tradition?

Paul Tillich identifies the Reformation as being a time where the question of authority (namely that of the Pope and the Councils of the Church) became central to the story of the Church.²⁶³ In keeping with that foundation, Tillich urges Christians to continue to ask similar questions of our own authorities, traditions and experiences today.²⁶⁴ This can be particularly pertinent as the Church addresses the question of gay marriage; have we allowed the traditions or authorities of the church to suppress the higher authority of a Christ who identifies and stands with all those who are rejected or sidelined, and is, in himself, the love and the grace that fulfils and supersedes Law, dogma and moralism? Of course, the traditions, customs, language and symbols still very much have their place in our Christian lives and the life of the Church. Further, the authority of those who have been tasked with passing on these traditions should not simply be dismissed. However, it is with the very tools of these traditions that Christians are empowered, where necessary, to “revolt against the authorities which have shaped [them].”²⁶⁵

These anxieties, Tillich argues further, deeply affected the newly forming structures of meaning, power and belief; structures designed to keep anxiety bound within a “protective system of courage by participation.” These structures do not liberate, but rather offer a means of overcoming, which begin to fail in periods of great change. And this new conflict breeds further anxiety.²⁶⁶

Tillich argues that Christian theology must make a stance for “truth against safety,” even when that safety is integrally bound up with and upheld by the structure of the Church. The long history of conformity within the church from its earliest times must not be used as an excuse to confuse the idea of Christian courage as being a courage to be “a part.” Rather, Christian courage (“courage to be”), must run counter to this idea, and stand up vocally against it where necessary.²⁶⁷ The “courage to be” should therefore be seen as an essential expression of faith, and colour how we view faith in the first place. In this light, faith is then understood to be the experience of the power of the “self-affirmation of being in spite of

²⁶³ Tillich, *The New Being*, 82.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

²⁶⁶ Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 62.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 141.

nonbeing”,²⁶⁸ evident in every act of courage. Courage to be then becomes revelatory, offering up a glimpse of the nature of being itself.²⁶⁹

Vasey argues further that Christians have tended to respond to the seismic changes of cultural and the emergence of the free-market by upholding the idea of family as inseparable from the Christian, New Kingdom ideal.²⁷⁰ In particular, he argues that evangelical Christians have tended to promote the family as being a refuge from what they see as a secular and potentially corrupting society. However, he argues that this perspective may seriously undermine “the church’s capacity for mission and evangelism.”²⁷¹ Indeed:

most people do not live in an ‘ideal’ nuclear family; if people join the church as a refuge they will find it harder to engage with the city from which they are escaping.”²⁷²

However, this is not the world-view that pervades in twenty-first century Scotland, or, more broadly, across the Western world. Most of the economic activity of our population has transitioned into the public sphere, for economic and sociological reasons. Vasey argues that this has resulted in a dehumanisation (particularly in the treatment of women and children), that has, in turn, led to the development of a “social strategy” that has transformed the ways we perceive family.²⁷³

Vasey acknowledges the significant influence of the societies that emerged, particularly in Europe, as a result of the Reformation. However, he highlights what he sees as myths of that sixteenth century vision, and cautions modern day Christians against seeing those city states and social ideals as useful motifs for present day living or New Kingdom building. Further, he argues that the abandonment of economics to the secular realm, the independence of the market place and hostility to monasticism actually held back the impact the new Protestant churches may have had, drastically holding back the potential for Christian social witness. The idea that wealth should be held for the community was undermined, and middle class, family and market, values became paramount. One effect of this was that the church lost its witness to those within the community who did not or could not fit into that “Christian family

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 178.

²⁷⁰ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 33.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 33.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 33.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 30.

ideal”, and therefore did not or could not fit into the social axis of the newly forming market culture.²⁷⁴ Further, Vasey argues, this failing also resulted in the absence of any Christian message that was desire-affirming; the death of the message that the “ultimate goal [of desire] is not earthly beauty nor domestic bliss but God”.²⁷⁵

With this in mind, the URC in Scotland must commit itself to on-going Reformation. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was catalysed, in part, by much that it saw as being wrong in the Church of its day. As Reformed Christians, we must continue that precedent, where we see the need. Where scientific and social development in the enlightenment period resulted in the realisation of the evils of slavery, the Church has slowly responded. We must allow the same manner of response, to the cultural developments of our own time, even as we continue to hold “companionship” as the greatest Reformed good of marriage, and strive to find new ways to understand and honour this imperative, in the world of the twenty-first century.

Where do we need to update or revise our position?

In the 18th century, Protestant ethics began to adjust to the new world being created by industrialisation, where there was a greater need for self-management. A greater emphasis developed on the rational (moral and scientific,) which replaced the “conflicts and despairs” of the existential subject. However, it was only after the pressure of the social movements of the late nineteenth century, and the psychological movements of the twentieth century, that Protestantism became more open to what Tillich calls the “existential problems of the contemporary situation.”²⁷⁶ He observes, since the mid nineteenth century, a great move (in the West) to find ways to express the human anxiety felt about the meaning of existence, including issues such as death, faith and guilt. This drive for means of expression has, he feels, been crucial for Christians. The only way to communicate effectively with human beings is to participate in their concerns, and the language provided by existentialism has proved to be a great tool towards this goal. Participation in the concerns of others offers to benefit the Christian community greatly, particularly in those areas where assumptions and

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 112.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 112.

²⁷⁶ Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 133.

complacency have developed, around ownership of knowledge or answers.²⁷⁷ Therefore we can see that finding healthy and accessible expressions for our shared human anxiety around the meaning of existence (the existential approach) is a crucial tool for the church. Human relationships are one foundational way in which human beings search for meaning, and marriage has, traditionally, been the way that the Church has been able to participate in this search, as well as in the concerns that that search brings with it.

Although traditional marriage may not prove to be the only way that the Church can participate in that shared human anxiety, the Church's involvement in marriage remains an obviously embodied, incarnational and pastoral opportunity and imperative. Tillich argues that Christians must “communicate the Gospel as a message of man understanding his own predicament,” and Church-level involvement in all human, intimate relationships is a crucial way to do exactly this. However, this is not simply to say that the Church should limit itself to the solemnisation, parametering or guidance of relationships. It must go further, and commit itself to exposing the mechanisms of anxiety, conflict and guilt, built into our inherited and patriarchal models of gender and relationship. It must also learn to draw the very best of these structures, mirroring as they do the nature of humanity.²⁷⁸ Communication, at its best, is intrinsically about participation,²⁷⁹ and will be the only way that the contentious issues of our time find any resolution.

Culture, according to Tillich, exists within both a “predominant movement”, and an “increasingly powerful protest against this movement”. The “predominant movement” of our context is that of Industrial Society, and the protest of our time can be understood as “the spirit of the existentialist analysis of man’s actual predicament”.²⁸⁰ Tillich argues that the Church has responded to this conflict in contradictory ways.²⁸¹ In part, it has retreated into historical doctrines, cults and ways of life. However, this has been done with the use of two-dimensional language, or categories, that were created by the very “industrial spirit” against which they are reacting. The result of this is an over reliance on literalism, whose validity has been justified by a false separation of the supranatural above the natural. This, in turn, perpetuates the ongoing conflict. For the purposes of this dissertation, we must question any

²⁷⁷ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 207, 208.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 203.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 204.

²⁸⁰ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 43.

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, 45.

over-reliance on covenantal and other overtly religious language for marriage; language that attempts to make literal a previously useful analogy and reduce sexual relations down into far more two dimensional and strict categories.

The opposite side of the response to the shift in world-view has been, argues Tillich, the (largely liberal) churches who have accepted the shift, and attempted instead to adapt to it, reinterpreting traditional symbols into contemporary terms. He feels that this attempt has resulted in something of a loss of the power of the message of those who took a supranaturalistic position. Both approaches are therefore ultimately inadequate. Tillich reminds us that the Christian message is the message of salvation, and salvation, he argues, means healing.²⁸² Therefore, the church must be sure to proclaim a “new healing reality” that is resolutely focused on the Good News, not bound by doctrinal, ritual or moral laws. Therefore Christian symbols, including marriage, must not be “absurdities, unacceptable for the questioning mind of our period.” Rather, they must point to God, through prophetic justice and love. How we understand our human, intimate relationships must progress. If marriage has become an idol, then we must have the courage to deconstruct it, and refocus on our understanding of God's Covenant and promise of reconciliation.

No retreat into legalistic moralism is acceptable for the Church; such a position is the antithesis of the Grace of Christ, and holds the very real tendency to become oppressive. Morality however, is the “self-affirmation of our essential being.” It should not be confused with an affirmation of the self in terms of the desires or fears of the self, the ethics of which could only be based on calculation and weighing up of avenues to fulfillment. Rather it is an affirmation of the innate Word of God dwelling within our very nature, and through the Spirit.²⁸³ Tillich points to the classical understanding of the Natural, as being the law that is implicit within the essential nature of human kind. This nature was given in Creation, lost during the Fall and restored by both Moses and Jesus, through the giving of the Torah and the salvation wrought by death and resurrection.²⁸⁴ Reformed theology, Tillich argues, holds the “possibility of a dynamic concept”, as it is determined more by ethical traditions and

²⁸² *Ibid*, 49.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 137.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 137.

convention. This allows it to be a voice of protest against each “moral content” that falsely lays claim to an unconditional character.²⁸⁵

Tillich argues that the radical imposition of systems of ethical rules (moralisms,) form the conscience of those upon which they are imposed.²⁸⁶ However, as the authorities that impose these systems are themselves not absolute, there is a great risk to humanity in accepting those systems.²⁸⁷ If morality shirks its responsibility to self-affirmation, subjecting itself to a (falsely) unconditional authority, it has denied itself the risk of resistance, which Tillich calls the “Courage to Be”. Therefore, he argues, we can see that moralisms give the (false) impression of safety, whereas morality lies within the “unsafety” of risk and challenge.²⁸⁸

Justice, Tillich argues, is fulfilled in love; the innate “principle of life”.²⁸⁹ Love is not simply an emotion. Rather, it is the “ground, the power, and the aim of justice”.²⁹⁰ It is the life-force that urges us towards “reunion with itself”.²⁹¹ The norm of justice, Tillich claims, is “reunion of the estranged”,²⁹² and the creative justice of love is the union of love and justice with the out-working of grace; true morality.

Nelson argues that there is a “growing awareness” that the Church needs to: recognise the longing that existed for “more meaningful and more human sexual relationships”; embrace the crucial insights of feminist theology around the “sexist limitations” of Christian life and thinking; open itself to sexual meanings as being more “socially-created than biologically-given”; open itself to and learn from sexual minorities; find a sexual theology that embraces wholeness and embodiment, sexual pleasure as a good and the importance of self-affirmation for incarnational theology;. Further, it must go beyond traditional sexual ethics, to find a more profound sexual theology that is more truly experiential and existential. It must become a site for God's ongoing “self-disclosure” and develop a more rigorous approach to the serious implications of Christian faith to sexual lives.²⁹³

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 137.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 140.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 144.

²⁹³ Nelson, *Embodiment*, 16.

Love must be the central ethical norm for Christians.²⁹⁴ It is, as Nelson states, “the Bible's supreme way of articulating God's purposes for and actions toward humankind”. Further, “it has been Christians' paramount description of their experience in meeting the divine presence in Jesus Christ”. However, love as a centralising ethic has been prone to misuse by Christians over the millennia; from the perpetuation of slave ownership, to the domineering of husbands and fathers, in the dehumanising of human beings in the name of love. Nelson urges us to be contextual and be clear upon the content of the words we use. If love is truly the central meaning and purpose of our sexuality, it must be the core measure for any act.

Conclusion

Michael Vasey challenges the presupposition that it should be difficult for Christians to revise existing and rooted beliefs and doctrines. He argues that “horizons change as people move”,²⁹⁵ and as “new worlds come into view”.²⁹⁶ When we talk about marriage, sex and relationships, language can be crucial, for “sexuality sounds dangerous; family feels safe”.²⁹⁷ Therefore, the challenge for the church must be to find appropriate language that honours the sensitivities of our culture and tradition, but hold faith in the innate ability of the Church (and beyond) to adapt to the changes of the world around it, and continue to reform.

We have seen that a good variety of relationships exist within the Scottish Synod of the URC, and that, by and large, the membership of the Synod are comfortable with these relationships. We have also seen that the Synod membership have a broader understanding of the “marital-type relationship” than simply that which is covered by the current institution of marriage. The Synod concurs with the primacy of companionship as a Reformed good of marriage, but does not see it as a Creation Ordinance, and hold different views on the idea of marriage as a Covenant.

Understanding the deep symbolism of marriage, and utilising the ideas of estrangement and reconciliation, as we look for the ways in which God's love is manifest and embodied in our human relationships, I believe that we have a strong foundation upon which to build a new Reformation around human relationships. Commitment to on-going reform, and to questioning authority, where we see the need, is in our make-up, as Reformed Christians, and

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 109.

²⁹⁵ Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 23.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

we must not shirk this responsibility. Ultimately, grace must win over law, and our task as twenty-first century Reformed Christians in Scotland is to formulate and live out a morality of integrity, and speak out strongly against legalistic moralism.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the Reformed traditions of marriage in Scotland, with a specific focus on the Scottish Synod of the URC. My field research has shown that a broad range of relationships are currently represented within the Synod, and that long-term commitment and quality of relationships are of primary importance to its members. It has also identified in the Synod both the legacy of Congregational, evangelical social concern, and the more recent influence of Congregational liberalism, which has continued that legacy of social concern and inclusion. I would suggest that it is this democratic combination of evangelical heritage and liberal focus that has allowed the Scottish Synod of the URC to continue the Congregational vision of MG Drummond, remaining “innately adaptable to the absorption of fresh Christian revelation.”²⁹⁸

We saw in Chapter 1 that the sixteenth century Reformers, along with later Reformed theologians, placed companionship and mutuality as the greatest good of marriage. Also crucial to their understandings of marriage were the motifs of Creation Ordinance and Covenant. In Chapter 2 we saw that the members of the Scottish Synod of the URC, clergy and lay-people alike, were committed to Christian inclusion and equality, as it relates to same-sex marriage; identified the ways in which divorce, although often tragic, is an essential safeguard for those in abusive or damaging relationships; were concerned about infidelity, seeing it as a more appropriately broad focus than the somewhat contextually time-bound idea of adultery; were deeply concerned with traditions that have, or may continue to, subjugate women; and believed that cohabitation is a “modern-day” form of marriage, and that, within long-term, committed relationships, sex out-with marriage was a perfectly acceptable thing for Christians.

In Chapter 3, we explored the idea of a broadening of the definition of marriage, to encompass all intimate relationships that may offer a sense of reconciliation from the estrangement human beings experience from God, Other and Self. We were reminded of the Reformation imperative towards ongoing, continual reform, and the ways in which we have a Christian responsibility to discern God's will through the myriad ways that the Spirit moves, in science, psychology, sociology and even economics. We challenged the ways in which

²⁹⁸ Drummond, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism*, 222.

marriage is, at times, idolatrously glorified, and reminded ourselves of the negative links that marriage has had, historically, with the classification of women as property, leading to its being used as a mode of social control.

Utilising the existentialist approach of Paul Tillich, this dissertation has argued that marriage should be seen as a “symbol” or “idea”, which encompasses the themes of New Kingdom, gender, sexual orientation identity, equality and love. Related to these themes are the related “interests” of community, family, patriarchy. Only if we recognise these themes and interests can marriage or intimate relationships be called Covenantal, reflecting the themes and interests of God's Covenant with humanity. However, we must be cautious that marriage, like any other symbol, does not become idolatrous. Mindful of this, we asked whether it was now time to look to new models or frameworks within which to understand intimate human relationships, and the ways in which we can experience God through these.

To this end, the understanding of estrangement (sin) and reconciliation (grace), proposed by both Tillich and Nelson, has been examined, and shown to be incredibly helpful in understanding the reasons human beings reach out to each other for intimacy and connection. The ways in which we connect with Self, Other and God are means of “knowing”, and are always linked to our ways of loving. Desire, when seen in this light, is not simply for pleasure, but also for knowing; of God, Self and Other. Tillich argues that it is only through relational participation that human beings can break through the existential conflict of estrangement from God (and consequently Self and Other). If love is, as he states, an expression of the total participation of the being, then being in love offers the fulfilment of the desire for reunion, which is reconciliation, and the means of knowing God, and his desire for us. In this way, salvation is experienced through the healing of the wholeness and connection found in healthy, life-giving relationships.

From this, we can see that sexual intimacy, when occurring in healthy and mutually edifying contexts, can be the opposite of “sinful”, if sin is to be understood in terms of estrangement. Rather, it holds the potential to be both reconciliative and a crucial path to knowing. This knowing is of God, Other and Self; each of which is a crucial aspect of both long-term, stable human relationships, and the ongoing Christian walk. The future challenge for the Church is therefore to find ways to integrate these understandings into the ways we talk about human sexuality and relationships, theologically and pastorally.

We also have focused upon Tillich's argument that Christianity is not about Law. Rather it is about Grace; "morality" over "moralism". Moralism, the over-reliance on legalistic dogma; the very thing Jesus taught he had come to overcome, has continued to be an oppressive and harmful form of estrangement, perpetuated by Christian theology. However, morality, as an out-working of grace, offers the gift of reconciliation, and requires a non-judgmental Christian ethic. It is something that exists naturally within each human being, and must be drawn out, as the "self-affirmation of our essential being", or the innate dwelling of the spirit within us. It can only be drawn out through the gift of grace, which overcomes guilt and estrangement, as we enter into the new being that we are in Christ, and begin the process of healing of the divide between what we are and what we were created to be.

As Nelson has argued, the Church needs to make space to honour the deeply meaningful relationships that exist within it, that do not fit easily within the confines of the institution of marriage, as we have come to know it. It must challenge itself about the ways that patriarchal structures and thinking have limited the ways that we understand intimate relationships and left us with models more to do with Law than with Grace. It must find new ways of doing theology that embrace wholeness and embodiment, and affirm the importance of incarnational knowing, particularly as that relates to sex, within the holistic well-being of the individual.

Vasey suggests that Christianity ought not to struggle to adjust and adapt to the new reality in which it exists. Within the Reformed Tradition, there exists a clear imperative to be a continually Reforming Church, and marriage is one of the most pertinent issues of time requiring this commitment from us. The core Christian message (the Gospel) is not "about" sexual morality. It is not a message of Law. It is Good News: proclaiming the love of God, redeeming creation, through Christ. From that Good News, we should expect transformed ways of being and living. Our understanding of marriage must sit within this Gospel understanding; if it does not, it becomes idolatry. Our Christian ethics, and specifically sexual ethics, must therefore be out-workings of this understanding of the Gospel.

This dissertation poses a number of challenges to the Scottish Synod of the URC. The Church must challenge itself to deal better with the issues that surround divorce, and the breakdown of relationship. It must learn a new comfort with talking about sex in healthy and comfortable ways. It must have the courage to free itself from unhelpful, harmful dogma (moralism) and,

from this point, the courage to offer ethical imperatives, based on the reconciliative Covenant of grace. The Church must acknowledge that the insights offered in 2013 by Steve Chalke do not just have resonance for the issue of homosexuality; the principles of justice, reconciliation and inclusion are essential New Kingdom values for *all* people. We must never allow marriage to become an idol, risking leaving people whose relationships come under its confines, at present, as well as those whose relationships do not, vulnerable or isolated. We must recognise that the Bible does not offer a simple instruction manual for Christian life in the twenty-first century; our challenge is to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, tradition, reason and revelation, and have the courage to address the questions of our time with a confidence based on this discernment.

Finally, we would do well, as a Synod whose roots lie so proudly in the tradition of Scottish Congregationalism, to remember the words of M G Drummond, when he argued that the democratic character and legacy of Congregationalism makes it innately adaptable to the absorption of fresh Christian revelation, and that any church that is truly a church of the people need never fear new ideas, as it is naturally open to being the voice of the Spirit.²⁹⁹ I believe that we must continue to be suspicious of, and rebellious against where required, any traditions that do not reflect our New Kingdom focus, and continue the essential work of reinterpreting old truths to the minds of the present day. This is the “Courage to Be”,³⁰⁰ described by Tillich. We must continue to live out Drummond’s vision of the “receptive function” of Congregationalism for every generation, in our role as a receptor, filter and mediator between the traditions of the Reformed movement, the workings of the Spirit, and the new culture that continues to develop in Scotland.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 222.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 229.

Appendix 1

Congregational Survey 1

1. Do you identify as (please circle all that apply):

Male
Female
Transgender
Other, please specify

2. Are you:

Under 25
25-44
45-64
65+

3. Are you currently:

Married
In a Civil Partnership
Living with a long term partner
In a non-domestic relationship of any length
Single (including widowed)
Other, please specify

4. If you have children, are they (please tick all that apply):

Married
In a Civil Partnership
Living with a long term partner
In a non-domestic relationship of any length
Single (including widowed)
Other (please specify)

5. If you have grandchildren, are they (please tick all that apply):

Married
In a Civil Partnership
Living with a long term partner
In a non-domestic relationship of any length
Single (including widowed)
Other (please specify)

Appendix 2

Congregational Survey 2

1. Do you identify as (please circle all that apply):

Male
Female
Transgender
Other, please specify

2. Are you:

Under 25
25-44
45-64
65+

3. Are you currently:

Married
In a Civil Partnership
Living with a long term partner of the opposite sex to you
Living with a long term partner of the same sex as you
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the opposite sex to you
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the same sex as you
Single (including widowed)
Please feel free to comment here:

4. If you are currently in a relationship of any sort, did you have other sexual partners before this relationship?

Yes/ no/ prefer not to answer
Please feel free to comment here:

5. If you are currently single, have you had any sexual partners during this time?

Yes/ no/ prefer not to answer
Please feel free to comment here:

6. Would you identify your sexual preference as being broadly:

Heterosexual (straight)
Homosexual (gay or lesbian)
Bisexual
Other (please specify)
Please feel free to comment here:

7. If you have adult children, are they (to the best of your knowledge, and please circle all that apply):

Married
In a Civil Partnership
Living with a long term partner of the opposite sex to them
Living with a long term partner of the same sex as them
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the opposite sex to them

In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the same sex as them

Single (including widowed)

Heterosexual (straight)

Homosexual (gay or lesbian)

Bisexual

Other (please specify)

Please feel free to comment here:

8. If you have adult grandchildren, are they (to the best of your knowledge, and please circle all that apply):

Married

In a Civil Partnership

Living with a long term partner

In a non-domestic relationship of any length

Single (including widowed)

Heterosexual (straight)

Homosexual (gay or lesbian)

Bisexual

Other (please specify)

9. Do you feel that sex between men and women is acceptable for Christians, out-with marriage?

Yes/ no (Please comment if you wish)

10. Do you feel that sex between people of the same sex is acceptable for Christians?

Yes/ no (Please comment if you wish)

11. Do you believe that marriage should be:

only for men and women (heterosexual)

for both same sex and opposite sex couples

(Please comment if you wish)

12. Do you feel that marriage still has relevance as an institution these days:

Yes/ no (Please comment if you wish)

13. Are there any relationships or perspectives on relationships you are aware of in the Scottish URC that you have struggled with?

Yes (Please say why)

No

14. Please tell us something about your thoughts and feelings on sexual morality for Christians:

Appendix 3

Slide Plan for Synod Workshop

- **Slide 1** – Introduction, including Tillich on “Morality vs Moralism”
- **Slide 2** – The current situation in Scotland
- **Slide 3** – Scotland pre-Reformation
- **Slide 4** – The Church Fathers on Marriage - “don't enjoy sex!”
- **Slide 5** – Reformed “goods” of marriage
- **Slide 6** – Martin Luther
- **Slide 7** – John Calvin
- **Slide 8** – John Knox
- **Slide 9** – The Westminster Confession of Faith
- **Slide 10** – Karl Barth
- **Slide 11** – SOCU
- **Slide 12** – Christopher Ash
- **Slide 13** – Mark Driscoll
- **Slide 14** – Scottish Congregationalism
- **Slide 15** – The URC and sexuality
- **Slide 16** – Steve Chalke
- **Slide 17** – Introduction into conversation
- **Slide 18** – Introduction into feedback

Appendix 4

Survey Monkey Questionnaire

1. Are you:

Male
Female
Transgender
Heterosexual (straight)
Homosexual (gay or lesbian)
Bisexual
Other (please specify)

2. Are you:

Married
In a Civil Partnership
Living with a long term partner of the opposite sex to you
Living with a long term partner of the same sex as you
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the opposite sex to you
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the same sex as you
Single (including widowed)

3. If you have any children are they (to the best of your knowledge and please tick all that apply):

Married
In a Civil Partnerships
Living with a long term partner of the opposite sex to them
Living with a long term partner of the same sex as them
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the opposite sex to them
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the same sex as them
Single (including widowed)
Heterosexual (straight)
Homosexual (gay or lesbian)
Bisexual
Other (please specify)

4. If you have adult grandchildren are they (to the best of your knowledge and please tick all that apply):

Married
In a Civil Partnerships
Living with a long term partner of the opposite sex to them
Living with a long term partner of the same sex as them
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the opposite sex to them
In a non-domestic relationship of any length with someone of the same sex as them
Single (including widowed)
Heterosexual (straight)
Homosexual (gay or lesbian)
Bisexual
Other (please specify)

- 5. What do you feel the purpose of marriage is?**
- 6. Do you feel that sex between men and women is acceptable for Christians, out-with marriage?**
- 7. Do you feel that sex between people of the same sex is acceptable for Christians?**
- 8. Do you believe that marriage should be:**
Only for men and women (heterosexual)
For both same sex and opposite sex couples
- 9. Please tell us something about your thoughts and feelings on sexual morality for Christians, or any other matters that came to mind as you filled in this questionnaire.**

NB: This survey asked only for demographics relating to gender, sexual orientation and marital status. By error, no question was included relating to age.

Appendix 5

One-to-one interviews with volunteers from the online survey

- Tell me a bit about your family background
- Tell me how you ended up in this church
- Tell me a bit about your current relationship situation, sexual or otherwise
- Tell me a bit about your relationship history
- What do you think the “point” of marriage is?
- Who do you think should be allowed to marry?
- What do you think of Civil Partnership?
- What do you believe constitutes adultery?
- What do you think about monogamy?
- What do you think about sex between people that are not married?
- What do you think about divorce?
- Broadly, what do you feel has informed your perspective on these issues?

Appendix 6

Interviews with clergy and church leaders

- Tell me a bit about your family background and present relationship situation
- Tell me a bit about your theological background
- What would you say your theology of marriage is?
- More broadly, what do you feel has informed your perspective?
- What do you think of Civil Partnership?
- What do you believe constitutes adultery?
- What do you think about monogamy?
- What do you think about sex between people that are not married?
- What do you think about divorce?
- What sorts of relationships have you blessed or performed marriages for, and do you have any reflections on these?

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