

# Christian marriage in a changing culture



**While the fight against same sex marriage legislation may continue for some time, Ray Porter argues that we should begin to examine how Christians might act once the bill becomes law**

Eighteen couples stood in front of me waiting to make their wedding vows. They were dressed in their finest clothes and, in the pews behind them, were their children, families and friends. They had all had Muslim weddings years earlier, but now as Christian people who would have a part in church leadership, and in accordance with the church rules, they wanted a Christian wedding.

Their Islamic marriages had allowed the men more than one wife, but none had availed themselves of that opportunity. Now they would have two marriage certificates: one that satisfied the state and another that showed the dedication of their marriages to the Lord Jesus in whom they trusted for salvation.

Christians in Indonesia and many other nations have long lived with more than one concept of marriage in their communities. They have developed ways of witnessing to their Christian convictions while abiding by the law of the

land. No Christian in Indonesia is married legally in church. Couples will register their marriage at the government offices and then come as a couple for the church ceremony. This is also the practice in many other countries.

Sometimes there will be a gap between the civil and the church marriages. Our language teacher officially married her fiancé before going to Australia for a six months course. They wanted to recognise their commitment to each other, but the marriage wasn't consummated until she returned and they had held a church wedding.

In England we have for centuries been able to combine a marriage that satisfies state law and one that witnesses to biblical marriage. With the passing of the new marriage law which allows marriages between people of the same sex, it is imperative that we establish a distinction between Christian and secular marriage. While the initial legislation will allow the Church of England (and Wales) exemption



# 13

If I speak of angels but do not have love, I have become a sounding [piece of] brass or a clashing cymbal.<sup>a</sup> 2 And if I have the gift of prophesying and I am acquainted with all the secrets<sup>r</sup> and all knowledge, and if I have all the faith and if I give all my possessions to feed others,<sup>j</sup> and I do not have love, I am nothing.<sup>k</sup> 3 I boast, but do not have love, I am not profited at all.<sup>l</sup> 4 Love<sup>m</sup> is long-suffering<sup>n</sup> and kind.<sup>o</sup> Love is not jealous,<sup>p</sup> it does not brag,<sup>q</sup> does not get puffed up,<sup>r</sup> 5 does not behave indecently,<sup>s</sup> does not look for its own interests,<sup>t</sup> does not become provoked.<sup>u</sup> It does not keep account of the injury.<sup>v</sup> 6 It does not rejoice over unrighteousness,<sup>w</sup> but rejoices with the truth.<sup>x</sup> 7 It bears all things,<sup>y</sup> believes all things,<sup>z</sup> hopes all things,<sup>a</sup> endures all things.<sup>b</sup> 8 Love never fails.<sup>c</sup> But whether there are [gifts of] prophesying, they will be done away with; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will be done away with.<sup>d</sup> 9

CHAP. 13  
c 1Co 14:18  
d 2Ba 6:5  
e Mt 7:22  
f 1Co 14:3  
Re 19:10  
g 1Co 4:1  
Eph 1:9  
h 1Co 12:8  
Lu 17:6  
i 1Jo 4:20  
j Mt 6:2  
k Ro 5:7  
l 2Co 9:7  
m Ro 5:5  
Ro 13  
1Jo 4  
n 1Th 5  
2Pe 1  
o Eph 3  
p 2Co 12  
Ga 5  
q Pr 11  
r Co 11  
s R 1  
t  
u

Photo: nfnitloop



*Christian couples at a marriage ceremony in Indonesia. They had been married as Muslims years earlier, but receive a Christian wedding as part of becoming church leaders.*

from the registration of same-sex marriages, the time may soon come when for the sake of Gospel clarity, the Church of England ceases to act as a servant of the state in the matter of marriages, since the state has now abandoned the law of God. We may want to learn from the practice of other countries such as Indonesia, but it will also challenge us to think more carefully about what we understand by Christian marriage.

The Christian church has lived with many different marriage regulations down the centuries. Some of Paul's arguments in 1 Corinthians 7 relate to existing pagan law. They deal also with situations in which marriage was not the free expression of love between a couple, but something that was arranged by families for their own purposes.

Augustine may have been the first person to elevate matrimony to a sacrament as he countered views that denigrated marriage in favour of celibacy. The Reformation removed it from the list of sacraments, declaring that there was no biblical ceremonial command. The Barebone's Parliament of 1653, which was composed of unelected

representatives of congregational churches, for the first time made marriage a civil ceremony only. (They also made the interesting provision that dumb persons could have a valid marriage without repeating the words of promise and that those without hands were excepted from the injunction to join hands.)

Marriage law has changed much over the centuries and differed from country to country. Onesimus Ngundu, formerly Principal of Harare Theological College, in his doctoral thesis examined the issue of the relationship between African customary marriage and Christian marriage. He sought to demonstrate how a biblical view of marriage could work out in the life of modern African churches.

The change in marriage law in England and Wales presents us with a similar challenge. While the fight against the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill may continue for some time, we should begin to examine how Christians might act once the bill becomes law. Whatever law might prevail in our country, we want to uphold and promote Christian marriage. The state's redefinition of marriage merely

changes the law of England and Wales and not God's law. We must distinguish between state marriage and Christian marriage in a way that has not been necessary before.

The Free Churches face the first challenge in that, unlike the Churches of England and Wales, they have no legal protection if they continue to officiate at state recognised marriages. They have the liberty of deregistering their churches as places for the solemnisation of marriage and their ministers ceasing to function as registrars. Those who wish to be married according to state law may avail themselves of the facilities of the local registry office.

Churches would then be free to develop their own pattern of celebrating a Christian wedding. This would be purely a pastoral service with no legal standing. It would be based on the biblical teaching that God institutes marriage between one man and one woman who freely consent to be joined in the covenant of marriage. The couple would come to make their vows before God that they intend to forsake all other relationships for their lifetimes. The expectation would be that the consummation of the marriage would take place after the ceremony, although there may be occasions when it would take place after the civil ceremony.

We would thus preserve in the ceremony all that has previously been in place in accordance with Christian belief and give up what has been our civic function. The things of

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Caesar would be rendered to Caesar, but we would preserve our duty to God.

For the Anglican Church there is the question of whether it wants to voluntarily relinquish its civil function in marriages, even if its exception is not cancelled by future legislation. The current requirement to solemnise the marriages between any single persons living in the parish does provide some evangelistic (and financial) advantages, but it is not a necessary part of our gospel witness. Indeed today, with the almost universal cohabitation before marriage and a general liberal view of the remarriage of divorcees, church weddings are often not a testimony to a Christian view of marriage.

But if we were to take such a stand, it would need to go hand in hand with serious marriage discipleship. The answer to a bad marriage law is the grace of a good marriage. A Christian marriage is not just a ceremony that reminds us of biblical teaching. The greatest Bible concept for marriage is that it is a witness to the relationship between Christ and his church.

The Catholic classification of marriage as a sacrament did serve to identify it as a testimony to the grace of God. The great teaching of Ephesians 5 is a challenge to all Christian marriages. Most of us will confess that our marriages do not always serve as a witness to the love of Christ for his church or the church's response to him.

The pastoral care we give to those whose marriages have failed must not mean an acceptance of the world's standards of marriage and family breakup. We need to examine our church life to make sure that all the members have time to spend working on their marriages and are not so burdened with church activities that work colleagues become closer friends than spouses. We will watch out for signs of tension in marriages, both our own and that of our friends, and seek to help each other to deal with pressure points and avoid sin.

Let us then see the attempted redefinition of marriage by this government as a fresh challenge to be counter-cultural, ready to suffer for our beliefs, and as a new opportunity to present the gospel as we show that Christian marriage is true marriage according to the declared will of God.