
CHAPTER FOUR: STORIES OF MARRIAGE AND OF PREMARITAL CONVERSATIONS

*Extraordinary people visualize not what is possible,
but rather what is impossible.
And by visualizing the impossible,
they begin to see it as possible.
Cherie Carter Scott*

In this chapter I will briefly describe certain biblical *portraits* of marriage and certain approaches to marriage preparation. I deliberately chose the word "portrait", because it portrays the gap between the portrait and that which is portrayed. A portrait is not a photo image, but a representation of certain understanding and perception of reality - "ways of seeing". A portrait stimulates its viewer to engage imaginatively with what is beyond adequate representation. When this happens, insight may occur and portraits may begin to be appropriated in new ways.

Describing these different portraits is not easy, mainly because nowhere in Scripture do we find an ordered and systematic discussion concerning marriage - as is the case with justification by faith for example. Different aspects of marriage, from Genesis to Revelation, come to us in little bits and pieces, somewhat scattered and often illusive. A synthesis of all of these elements requires a minimum amount of analytical and theological reflection on the part of the reader. In this discussion I will refer to some of the main portraits of marriage in the Bible, and this is by no means *all* the possible references to biblical portraits of marriage.

4.1 BIBLICAL PORTRAITS OF MARRIAGE

Over the centuries the Church has in different ways formulated a pastoral theological approach towards marriage and the family. Everett in his book Blessed be the bond (1985) makes the following interesting remark:

The churches' attention to these issues has either dwelt in the lofty ideals derived from faith positions or enthusiastically grabbed on to whatever recent therapeutic device might seem to help people struggle through their difficulties or

maximize their marital or familial happiness (1985:xi).

Boszormenyi-Nagy (1986:333) writes that marriage -

is probably society's most vulnerable institution . . . Whatever its limits, marital life functions as modern history's most steadfast and reliable forum, the place in which people most readily invest their efforts in trying to reach tolerable and sometimes creative balances between individual freedom on the one hand and long-term comfort and security on the other.

It is Gerdes (1988:184) who describes four ways in which society defines and formulates marriage, namely legally (see 2.9.2), according to religious beliefs and practices, socially and psychologically. He (1988:194) goes on to identify three typical marriage models (the term "model" is employed by Gerdes) namely the traditional model, the companionship model, and the egalitarian model. The imposition or use of these models in order to identify and describe a marriage is problematic. Each model has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, the egalitarian model confirms the full worth and personhood of each partner, but such a marriage could also lead to unhealthy competition within the marriage and a fear that one is putting too much into the marriage while at the same time not receiving enough.

For this reason, it is not the model of marriage which is important, but rather the quality of the relationship and this is where the insights of postmodernism can be helpful. That is, our approach to marriage preparation should be less oriented, for example, towards teaching certain dogmatic points of view concerning marriage and certain specific roles of husband and wife. Theological descriptions of marriage should be taken as referring to possibilities, not to assumed realities. Through a narrative conversation the pastor, the couple and the Christian tradition engage in a dynamic hermeneutical process (see previous chapter). In this regard, Thatcher (1999:236-239) talks about the *communal partnership as the matrix of the sacrament*. "Matrix" is understood as a situation or surrounding substance within which something else originates, develops or is contained. In the context of marriage, the matrix of the sacrament is the relationship of each to the other. Louw (1993:32ff) underlines also the importance of the quality of the relationship and proposes that an evaluation of the quality of the relationship should be made. A marital relationship is built on attitudes, role expectations, communication, habits, tasks,

sexuality, interaction, commitments, values and faith convictions. Jordaan (1996:12) points out that the postmodernistic desire for humans encountering each other has the potential of developing a Christian dialectic which addresses the essential human loneliness and need to belong within a marriage. Neuburger (1997:16) goes so far as to claim that our identity is an identity of belonging. A dialectical attitude to life allows for the immense diversity that is found in different marriages and can lead to a creative improvisation in order to develop the uniqueness of each marriage.

However, a word of warning must be mentioned regarding the implied promise of growth in intimacy of the dialectical approach to marriage, and this is in regard to the spirituality of the marriage.

The dialectical approach focuses on horizontal person-to-person intimacy, whilst the vertical or spiritual plane of person-to-God intimacy is necessary to complement and reinforce our ability to connect relationally.

Clinebell and Clinebell (1970:181) continue in the above vein when they write :

No human being can alone satisfy the spiritual hungers of his companions heart ... Intimacy reaches full flower for a couple only when they have found in, through, and beyond their marriage, a rich measure of those gifts which the great religions of the world have made available to men.

Clinebell goes on to outline three fundamental religious needs in persons, namely, the need for an experience of the numinous and the transcendent, the need for a sense of meaning, purpose and values in one's existence and the need for a feeling of deep trust and relatedness to life. These needs are more than can be satisfied by marriage partners.

Concerning the needs and expectations of marriage from a non religious point of view Neuburger (1997:18) makes the interesting remark that the high divorce rate should not be interpreted that marriage is losing its importance in society, but is rather linked to the high expectations that we hold about marriage - emotional and physical security, intellectual and sexual satisfaction, etc. - and which the family of origin or the professional context is not (any more ? = CdP) in the position to supply. Berscheid and Campbell (quoted in Fowers and Olson 1986:403) have also noted that at the same time -

that although close relationships have become substantially more

vulnerable to disruption and dissolution than they were just a generation or two ago, close relationships are seen by most people as being the prime source of personal happiness.

On the horizontal relational level this could be true, but the vertical relational level contributes another dimension of self-fulfilment as stated in the previous paragraphs.

Joubert (1996:45) concluded in a study of the New Testament understanding of marriage, that the Christian marriage implies that men and women are equal before God, that marriage is a religious institution which is placed within the framework of the couple's relationship with God, and that marriage has an eschatological dimension which implies the temporality of marriage subject to the fullness of the coming of the Kingdom of God. This study also focused on the right practice and understanding of sexuality within marriage. Joubert (1996:45) concludes that sexuality is a matter in which man and wife carry equal responsibility. The Christian marriage implies an accountability and responsibility before God. We get married not only for our sake, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Balswick and Balswick (1989:80) give another division of three models of marriage and summarize the major characteristics of these models of marriage as follows (see diagram below): traditional marriage (which is often mistakenly viewed by Christians as biblical), modern marriage, and biblical marriage. These three models are then compared in terms of the four aspects of their theological model: covenant (commitment), grace (adaptability), empowering (authority), and intimacy (communication).

Traditional	Biblical	Modern
Commitment		
Commitment (to the institution)	Covenant (between the partners)	Contract (self-fulfilment)
Coercive	Cohesive	Disengaged
Dutiful sex (male pleasure)	Affectionate sex (mutual pleasure)	Self-centred sex (personal pleasure)

Adaptability		
Law	Grace	Anarchy
Predetermined (segregated roles) Rigid / Stilted	Creative (interchangeable role) Adaptable / Flexible	Undetermined (undifferentiated roles) Chaotic
Authority		
Ascribed power Authoritarianism (male headship)	Empowering Mutual submissiveness (interdependence)	Possessive power Absence of authority (no submissiveness)
Male centred	Relationship centred	Self-centred
Communication		
Inexpressiveness	Intimacy	Pseudo-intimacy
Pronouncement (legislation)	Discussion (negotiation)	Demand (stalemate)
Non-assertive / Aggressive	Assertive	Aggressive

Without going into detail concerning the vast amount of literature about marriage and the family in the Christian tradition, the following theological vantage points can be distinguished:

4.1.1 Creational order

This is possibly the most popular way of theologising about marriage, sex and the family. It is especially built on Genesis 1-3 where marriage and the family are seen as a creational order. Concepts like man as created in God's image, and that this must also be interpreted in the relational sense, form part of this theological point of view.

When Jesus refers to marriage and divorce (Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12), he places marriage within the perspective of creation (Genesis 1:27-28, 2:20-24):

- The mosaic law is secondary in relation to the creational order.
- Sexuality is a gift of God to the woman and man. It is good and expresses the difference between the sexes.
- God places the sexuality in a particular context: within a legal relationship.

Understanding marriage as part of the creational order, before the fall, implies that it is not just valid for Christians, but also for non-Christians, i.e. for the whole of humanity. Humanity, man and woman, was created to reflect something of the character of God (Genesis 1:28), and it is in this context that the marital relationship should be understood.

The fact that marriage is situated before the fall implies that it does not have a redemptive character, but it creates a context of mutual sharing, to live our humanity as creatures according to the image of God.

The Genesis narrative states that woman was created to help man to accomplish his task: a suitable companion, an equal helper (עֵזֶר, כְּנֶגְדּוֹ Genesis 2:18, 20). This means that marriage exists in order for humanity to accomplish its original mandate. The term translated by *equal* or *suitable* (עֵזֶר) is important, since it means literally a vis-à-vis (counterpart, opposite). In this relationship one partner does not become the mirror image of the other, but each one keeps his/her otherness, and thus, his/her complementarity. The tension created in verse 18b is concluded in verse 20b, and prepares the way for verses 21-23. Humanity is a humanity-in-relation, created to communicate. When man says, "*This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...*" he uses an expression that refers to family ties, expressing a close, intimate relationship that endures (see also Genesis 29:14; Judges 9:2; 2 Samuel 5:1 & 19:12ff). There is also a word play between the word for man אִישׁ and the word woman אִשָּׁה that intensifies this close relationship between man and woman. It is interesting to notice that when God made (בָּנֶה) build) woman from the rib of man (Genesis 2:21 and 22), the word used for "rib" (צִלְעַ) could also mean "side". Thus, the help that man receives, is built from his side. She is the equal of man. She shares in his co-humanity, but at the same time, is different from him. In this way, their reciprocity and equality are at the same time emphasized.

It is well known that the first account of the creation of the world in Genesis comes to its climax with the making of humankind on the sixth day:

God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

The second account of the creation of the world (Genesis 2:4b-25) has the Lord God

making a man. The Lord subsequently decides that the man needs a partner (Genesis 2:8). All the animals and birds which God made are brought to the man, who names them, but finds no suitable partner among them. God then puts the man to sleep, takes one of his ribs, and builds it up into a woman. When the woman is brought to the man he exclaims :

This one at last is bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh! She shall be called woman, for from man was she taken (Genesis 2:23).

There then follows an editorial comment on this saying:

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and attaches himself to his wife, and the two become one (Genesis 2:24).

A more familiar version of this comment is found in the RSV:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

The idea of oneness in flesh is thought to have its root metaphorical meanings in the man's recognition of the woman's flesh as coming from his own, and in the oneness of sexual intercourse. It came to be seen as a union of the entire man and the entire woman. In it they become a new and distinct unity, wholly different from and set over against other human relational unities, such as the family or the race.

The term *one flesh* was not influential in the formation of the Jewish doctrine of marriage (and divorce). It was not used against the legitimate practice of polygamy (Deuteronomy 21:15-16). It does not occur again in the Hebrew Scriptures. The rabbis were more interested in whether the reference to the departure of the man from the family home to live with his wife, not a state of affairs to which they were accustomed, implies a matriarchal kind of society or whether it casts into question the patriarchal pattern with which the rabbis were so familiar in Israel. Since the text asserts the priority of the relationship of a man with his wife over his relationship with his parents, we may perhaps assume that, 1000 years BCE, the issue of a man's clash of loyalties between parents and wife was a troublesome one which the author was attempting to resolve. The text appears four times in the New Testament, twice in the Gospels, so it is a constitutive

idea in the formation of Christian marriage. It is also well known that the teaching of Jesus about marriage in the Gospels arises contingently out of contemporary disputes about divorce. In taking issue with the practice of divorce in Jewish society, Jesus appeals to a higher authority than the Mosaic law which provided for it (Deuteronomy 24:1). The authority is the two texts from Genesis just cited. Mark has Jesus quote Genesis 1:27 and 2:24:

In the beginning, at the creation, 'God made them male and female'. That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh (Mark 10:6-8; see Matthew 19:4-5).

The decisively new element in the understanding of the term *one flesh* is provided by the comment on it of Jesus himself. He says -

It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate (Mark 10:8b-9; Matthew 19:5-6).

By this single comment Jesus adds to the then prevailing understanding of the term several new meanings. It indicates, first, that the *attaching* or *cleaving* of the man to his wife is a deep personal union which actually creates a new identity for each of them. The couple are no longer two individuals. Each is who he or she is in relation to his or her partner. Secondly, the union is a permanent one. That this is so is made clear by the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' words. They think if a man cannot divorce a wife it would be better not to marry in the first place (Matthew 19:10; and see Mark 10:10). Thirdly, the union achieved by the man and the woman is achieved by action of God. There is a holiness about the union of marriage which is unhinted at in Genesis 2. God does not merely witness marriage vows: God ratifies them. Fourthly, divorce is excluded from the reign of God (although Matthew allows the famous exception of *porneia* - 19:9; 5:32). This follows not only from the permanence of the union but because of the uniting of the couple by God. And, fifthly, polygamy too appears completely excluded. While neither Jesus nor Genesis 2 says anything directly about polygamy, the personal union envisaged by Jesus cannot accommodate it.

But there are two further New Testament references to Genesis 2:24, the earlier of

which does not appear to support the interpretation put on *one flesh*. To the male Christians who thought their freedom from moral law brought about on their behalf by Jesus extended to visiting prostitutes Paul admonishes:

You surely know that anyone who joins himself to a prostitute becomes physically one with her, for Scripture says, "The two shall become one flesh" (1 Corinthians 6:16).

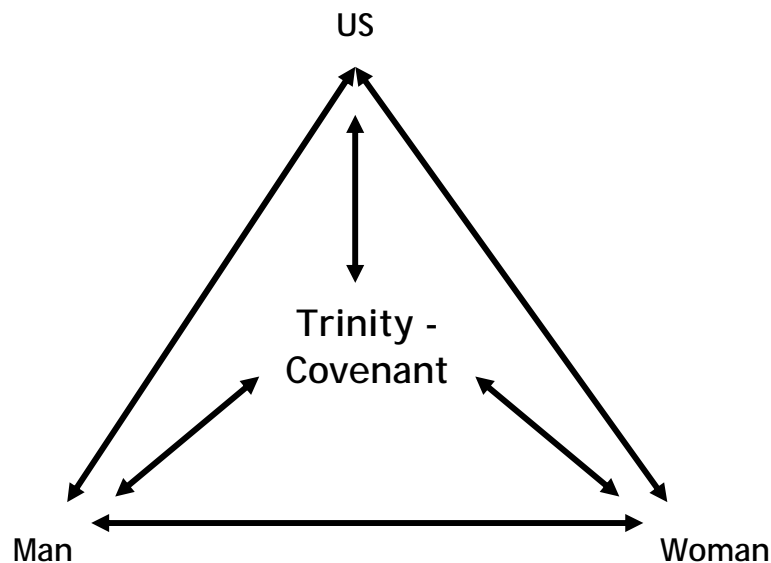
The fleshly union between a prostitute and her Christian client is clearly not a union of the moral kind envisaged by Jesus, brought about by God, and permanent. Does this therefore mean that Paul (who knew the teaching of Jesus about divorce - 1 Corinthians 7:10-11) drew a different conclusion about the meaning of becoming *one flesh*?

No. In an answer to a different question Paul rules:

The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband's. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife's (1 Corinthians 7:4).

It is a mistake to read this passage as a statement about ownership. *Belonging* is a better term, and the mutual belonging of the partners to each other is a striking element of the argument. It is best understood as a clear inference from the Genesis passage which Paul has just used. Since a husband and wife are *no longer two individuals* but are one flesh, each is in a real sense part of the other. The unity which they make as a couple vetoes any sexual independence which they may once have had as single people.

Graphical we could portray this unity of *one flesh* as follows:



This new relationship is neither the absorption of the personality of one person by that of the other person nor the losing of the personality of each partner to form a new unity. This is an adjusted diagram compared to the one proposed by Louw (1993:52-53). According to this diagram the man and the woman keep certain aspects of their previous status, but they have to renegotiate their new status (*us*). Their new status places them also in a different relationship towards God in the context of the covenant.

The covenant analogy in Ephesians 5 leads, as we have seen, to an appeal to the Genesis *one flesh* text. In illustrating the union which the writer believes to exist between Christ and the Church, he deploys the same insight just encountered in 1 Corinthians 7:4, that the bodies of a married couple do not simply belong to each other - they importantly *are* each other. The Ephesian analogy continues:

In loving his wife a man loves himself. For no one ever hated his own body; on the contrary, he keeps it nourished and warm, and that is how Christ treats the church... (Ephesians 5:28b, 29).

In part the observation is based on self-love. People care for their own bodies. But self-love comes to mean something quite different in Christian marriage. *Self* can only be articulated *at all* through reference (*deference* would be more accurate) to one's partner. The insight that a married person receives a new identity from his or her partner is drawn from Genesis 2:24. This can be affirmed with some confidence because a further word of explanation quotes it in full.

This is why (in the words of Scripture) a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31).

But this use of the Genesis text is given a final tentative twist which seems to have provoked comment in every period of church history and is immensely important. Commenting directly on his own use of the Genesis text, the author says:

There is hidden here a great truth, which I take to refer to Christ and to the church. But it applies also to each one of you: the husband must love his wife as his very self, and the wife must show reverence for her husband (Ephesians 5:32-33).

The *great truth (mystèrion mega)* is more usually translated *great mystery*. Tertullian, Jerome and the Latin Vulgate render μυστήριον as *sacrament*. The writer thinks that the sacrificial love of Christ for the Church now enables the one flesh union of Genesis 2:24 to be Christianly understood in a way which, prior to the sacrifice of Christ, had not been possible. Christ's love is thought to exemplify the love which the writer believes is to be found in the one-flesh union of Genesis. But he is *tentative* about his own interpretation (*I take to refer to*). The author is writing about a real, existential, current concern, and searching the Scriptures in the light of the questions being faced by his community. The Genesis text is clearly fundamental to the issue. But as a Christian writer he will wish to interpret whatever he finds in the Hebrew Scriptures as referring in some way to Christ (*εις Χριστον*). Contemporary Christians pondering over what has become of marriage have similar, but also dissimilar questions to ask, and these will be determinative when we search the Scriptures for ourselves. We will arrive at different answers, but in common with every generation of Christians they too must be transparently *εις Χριστον*.

The notion of marriage as *one flesh* in a patriarchal society has been used to incorporate the woman into the identity of the man, and so to transfer her and her property into his guardianship. Marriage then is too easily a loss. The new one flesh created marriage has too often been *his*. Without a mutual contribution to the married relationship an entire *gender-sex system* is encouraged in which wives exist through their husbands and subordinate their interests to those of men. Such relationships are clearly unjust. Socially, the wife has been in danger of becoming the man's adjunct, someone

attached to him in a permanently dependent and subordinate position, his representative in domestic matters, in particular, bearing and rearing *his* children and keeping his house clean. Her dependence on him in such circumstances is complete. There is not even any psychological space to think her own thoughts. What fragile sense of selfhood remains to her, if she exists only through him and for him?

The question to be faced is whether the one-flesh model of marriage operates to encourage gender imbalance, or whether the use of it by patriarchal churches, theologians and societies is responsible for this model reinforcing women's subordination. The Christian understanding of marriage is largely based on Jesus' own use of it. If it were to be abandoned by Christian theologians because it was deemed defective, serious questions would have to be asked about whether what remained was Christian marriage. Need that predicament be faced? Yes and no.

First, the all-important Genesis text from which Jesus quotes *does* assume that her flesh is his. The man was made first. The woman is made only after the failed search for a suitable companion for the man. The woman is made from the man's flesh, and when she is brought to him by the Lord God, it is *his* flesh that he recognizes. Moreover Paul (following the normal rabbinic exegesis of the time) reads the text in this way. On the one hand, the temporal priority of the first man over the woman is elevated by Paul to an ontological priority of men over women essentially, generically, functionally and timelessly.

Man is the image of God, and the minor of his glory, whereas a woman reflects the glory of man. For man did not originally spring from woman, but woman was made out of man; and man was not created for woman's sake, but woman for the sake of man (1 Corinthians 11:7b-9).

On the other hand we have seen that Paul insists that the bodies of partners in marriage are equally shared, for neither's body is individually: his or her own (1 Corinthians 7:4).

Whether Jesus understood *one flesh* as subordinating hers to his is much more doubtful. We have already noted how the disciples' reaction to Jesus' teaching on divorce indicated his far-reaching disagreement with conventional interpretations of both. Jesus' subsequent criticisms of one-sided divorce practice which permitted husbands to divorce their wives for trivial reasons and did not permit wives to divorce their husbands for any

reason (Mark 10:10-12) should lead us to think that Jesus was firmly addressing and correcting the androcentric bias of the Jewish establishment. The suggestion made here is that the one-flesh model is *not* of itself androcentric and offers a fine model of what Christian marriage might be. A difficulty with this suggestion is that to establish it beyond doubt would involve extracting a concept from the broader conceptual milieu of the time, and that milieu is androcentric beyond dispute. So any commendation of the one-flesh mode must adopt the approach taken with the covenant model earlier, that is, it will be legitimately put forward as a non-sexist model of marriage and contrasted with secular accounts of marriage and of the person.

When the idea of marriage as a union of a man and a woman becoming one flesh is added to the cocktail of individualistic notions of the human person characteristic of late modernity, it positively effervesces. The special case of human union which is marriage as envisaged by Jesus provides a convincing alternative to the secular ethic.

While secular society allows many of the meanings of Christian marriage to drain away, the traditional one-flesh model retains and preserves a vision of lifelong partnership commended by Christ himself. Borrowing (and slightly extending) the momentous insights of the Church's first theologian of marriage (the author of Ephesians), we may say the Genesis one-flesh text *means* a lifelong union where each partner loves the other as that partner loves himself or herself. In starting out in faith to love the *other* as one loves oneself, one engages in an adventure which embodies the love of God revealed in Christ, finds the face of Christ in the face of one's partner, and shares with him or her that love which Christ shared with the Church.

In contrast with the individualistic view of the human person, the partnership of marriage confirms the *relational* view of the person. Jesus' abbreviated use of the Genesis text which affirms male and female alike are made in the image of God (*God made them male and female*: Mark 10:6, Matthew 19:4, citing Genesis 1:27) confirms that the image of God is to be understood *relationally*. Alistair McFadyen (cited in Thatcher 1999:97) says -

If the image [of God] is construed in relational terms, then the structure of human and personal being may be seen to be ex-centric. By this I mean that persons are orientated upon themselves (centred) by moving towards the reality of others.

Marriage draws on the divinely created structure of human relations. The form which one's relations takes determines the form which one's personal centring and hence personal identity takes. This can be expressed simply through the dictum that persons are what they are for others or, rather, the way in which they are for others.

Marriage too, understood as a 'one-flesh union', appropriately qualified, is a *form* of relationship, potentially the paradigmatic form for beings who are persons-in-relation.

In contradistinction to the idolatry of romantic love is contrasted the passionate love of God which bursts out in Christ's sacrifice of himself on behalf of the Church. This is a self-giving which is total, and so physical. The notion of *flesh* of course suggests this. In contrast to the self-referential project of personal identity is the adventure whereby each partner in reaching out to the other receives him or her back again countless times over, and so allows his or her identity to be determined in part by the partner's. The union of partners in marriage as held by the author of Ephesians is meant to anticipate the union of all things in Christ. Christ's work brings together *everything in heaven and on earth* (Ephesians 1:10; 2:6). Christ's reconciling work brings into one body Gentiles and Jews *so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace* (2:16; 3:6). The author prays that his readers may -

be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge (Ephesians 3:17-19).

The *advantage* of this point of view is that it is clear and that it communicates to everyone. This is probably the reason why most Christian literature on marriage follows this line of thought. It also conveys a necessary value of naturalness in human relations: if people want to live happily in their relationships, they must also be in harmony with God and his creation. This important aspect should not be neglected in a theology of marriage and the family.

The *danger* is that when a whole theology is built on this idea, the result is that an ungrounded optimism concerning the potential of relationships is formed, and even accepted as obvious. The argument could be put forward that premarital and extra-marital sex are not a problem, as long as everything only takes place within the harmony of God's creation.

Even when Genesis 3 (the fall) is taken into account, this temporary drawback is overruled by a theology of recreation. This theological approach becomes even more evident since the Christian is recreated in Christ. Harmony with God and his creation is now not only obvious, but it becomes a calling.

If this theological point of view is the only hermeneutical key with which we try to understand marriage, sex and the family, it will lead to a merciless Pastoral Care. This natural creational order becomes the highest norm and no comfort is found for unmarried people, couples without children, couples who undergo invitrofertilsation, and not to mention people with a homosexual orientation (Müller 1996:45-46).

4.1.2 Sacramental view

The sacramental view (especially promogated by the Roman Catholic Church) of marriage is largely built on the above mentioned theological point of departure. The social and ecclesial institution of marriage is grounded in the basic structure of life lived as faith. This view emphasizes God's grace, working through nature and marriage as an order of creation. It is more concerned with the integrity of the symbol than with the justice of relationships. It places greater emphasis on the expectations of the church and less on the natural dynamics of love. It claims the presence of redemption, but denies the personal reality of brokenness and the perversity of life. The sacramental view tends to reduce marriage to an institutional form. Households and families exist to socialize people, uncritically, into the faith through the regular routines of their lives (Patton & Childs 1988:82, 100). The Roman Catholic Church only recognizes marriages which took place within the RCC itself. This sacrament, as in the case of the holy communion and baptism, is a visible sign of an invisible grace. The presence of the priest is viewed as a witness of the commitment. The council of Trente (16th century) insisted on the presence of a priest (up to that time in history, a mutual agreement for the marriage was enough) in order to underline the fact that by getting married the couple becomes part of the Christian community. About the year 1150 marriage became the 7th sacrament under the initiative of Pierre Lombard. He evokes the double conjunction of the partners, i.e. "the consent of the souls and the mixture of bodies". In this way, the Church took up position against the social practice of the time, i.e. arranged marriages. The Church holds the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that "makes the marriage." If consent is lacking there is no marriage. The priest (or deacon) that witnesses the

marriage celebration welcomes the consent of the contracting parties in the name of the Church and gives the blessing of the Church.

A mixed marriage needs for liceity the *express permission* of ecclesiastical authority. In case of disparity of cult an *express dispensation* from this impediment is required for the validity of the marriage. The priest (or deacon) who assists at the celebration of a marriage receives the consent of the spouses in the name of the Church and gives the blessing of the Church. The presence of the Church's minister (and also of the witnesses) visibly expresses the fact that marriage is an ecclesial reality (Catechism of the Catholic Church).

Regarding the point of view of the RCC, the following remarks can be made:

- The RCC does not consider marriage as the will of God for all mankind - believers and unbelievers - and, thus, that it forms part of the general grace of God.
- The RCC considers marriage as part of the order of creation *and* redemption.
- It does not consider that marriage is, in the first place, an event that implicates the society/community.
- It does not consider the fact that the texts in the Old Testament and the New Testament concerning the relationship between man and woman symbolize the relationship between God and his people.
- The RCC considers that the exchange of vows does not constitute a sacrament as a sign of the grace of forgiveness and a life with God.
- They do not take into account that a union between human beings stays fragile, and can be broken, even if it was not the initial intention of the man and the woman, and even though it is not the initial intention of God for humanity.
- The RCC considers that a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant does not exist.
- Often there is a contradiction between the official standpoint and the actual practice of the RCC. RCC does not recognize a marriage outside the RCC if permission was not asked for and granted. Protestants consider a couple as married after the civil wedding. If permission is granted, in the case of a mixed marriage, is this marriage Catholic or Protestant? In the case where the RCC has granted their permission for a mixed marriage, the latter is not considered as a real marriage, since it is not accepted as a sacrament.
- According to Fuchs (1979:137) the term *sacrament* is due to the wrong translation

of the word *μυστήριον* (Ephesians 5:32) by the Latin term, *sacramentum* (see also above).

For the RCC the sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us (Catechism of the Catholic Church). Protestant theology has always rejected this claim. The Reformation considered only baptism and holy communion as sacraments directly instituted by the Christ as visible signs of the salvation acquired at the cross. Marriage is by no means considered as an "automatic" grace. In the Scriptures marriage is presented as a calling to express and to realize the image of God according to which we are created.

In a certain way, we could understand marriage as a sacrament, because it has - in a very broad sense - the function of making visible the grace of God in our daily life. Marriage, and especially marriage between Christians, is one of the institutions that could transmit and exhibit faithfulness, tenderness, acceptance of the other, dependence and mutual support. Through the love for one another, through the gift of life and through faithfulness towards one another, love for God becomes a reality. Thatcher (1999:233ff), according to his ecumenical Theology of sacrament, also argues for a broader understanding for marriage as a sacrament that could also be acceptable for Protestants. According to Mackin (1989:7-8),

...in entering men's and women's lives thus sacramentally God does so with double and interlocking intent: to draw men and woman to himself, and to draw them to one another. In drawing them to himself in faith, trust and love, he would also draw them to one another in the same believing, trusting and caring attitude.

If sacrament is understood in this way, Protestants could be able to affirm the sacramental sense of marriage. If a sacrament mediates God's presence, the confinement of marriage to the order of redemption unacceptably restricts the omnipresence of God. Sacraments make visible the reality of God's love.

4.1.3 Covenant

Covenant is a major biblical symbol for the divine-human relationship and only later was it applied to marriage (especially in Reformed circles). The Hebrew term for covenant *בְּרִית* refers to a binding relationship. It -

signifies a relationship based on commitment, which includes both promises and obligations, and which has the quality of reliability and durability. The relationship is usually sealed by a rite - for example, and oath, sacred meal, blood sacrifice, invocation of blessings and curses - which makes it binding (Anderson in Thatcher 1999:68).

It seems almost inescapably related to the legal concept of contract, although some writers emphasize the contrast between the two concepts as it was understood in the ancient world :

The binding and inviolable character of covenants derived from the divine sanctions attached to the covenant agreement. Contracts have people as witness, and human or civil society as guarantor. Covenants have God or gods as witness, but not in the same sense that the gods or God simply vouch for the correctness of the agreement; they act as guarantors that the terms of the treaty, alliance, or covenant will be carried out (Palmer 1972:618).

There is a strong covenantal implication in the foundational text of Genesis 2:24:

For this reason man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (NIV)

The man who *leaves* (*יָצַב*) his father and mother is said to *sever a covenant* with them. When he *attaches himself* (*יָדַבֵּק*) to his wife he creates a covenant with her (Thatcher 1999:68).

The first biblical mention of a covenant is found in Genesis 6:18 when God establishes a covenant with Noah. This covenant is repeated in chapter 9:9-10 where God

actually extends his covenant to include even non-human creatures.

The second biblical reference in which God makes a covenant is Genesis 15:18, where the covenant is extended to Abraham. This covenant is later amplified in Genesis 17.

From these texts we can draw the following conclusions:

- God was not offering either Noah or Abraham any choice in the matter. That is, God was by no means saying, "Now I am going to commit myself to you *if* this is your desire". Instead the establishment of the covenant was based entirely on God's action. God's offer was in no way contractual; that is, it was not based on upon either Noah's or Abraham's keeping his end of the bargain. God's commitment was there whether it was accepted or not.
- God did desire and even commanded a response from both Noah and Abraham. Did this make God's covenantal offer conditional? No! The covenant that God offered was to remain *an everlasting covenant* regardless of what Noah or Abraham did.
- While the covenant itself was not conditional, the potential benefits or blessings it provided were. Both Noah and Abraham were given an option by God in the covenantal offer. If they were to benefit from the offer, they had to agree to fulfil their end of the bargain. Although the continuation of God's love was not conditioned upon the nature of Noah's or Abraham's response, their receiving of any of the blessings or the fulfilment of the covenant was conditional. Here there is the offer and the responsibility to react favourably in order to receive the blessing of the covenant.
- In the texts cited, God extended the covenant to more than just these two individuals. The covenant included their families as well. God extended *an everlasting covenant* (לְבָרִית עוֹלָם) to Abraham which included *generation after generation* (לְדֹר וָדֹר) (see Balswick and Balswick 1989:23-24).

It seems then, that entry into the covenant generally seems to be free. Once having entered, however, a person's freedom appears to be significantly limited. 'Covenant' has some of the characteristics of 'vocation' in that it involves committing oneself for the creation of a higher purpose; yet, it also serves as a model for God's order, a new and distinct community amongst other communities. The family is to be, as well as

to build, a new world. Because the covenant symbol is based on God's covenant with His people, by analogy it is more applicable to the parent-child relationship than to the marriage relationship.

Thatcher (1999:69-75) describes in certain details the further use of *covenant* in the Old Testament, especially as it is depicted in -

- Hosea's actual or fictitious marriage to Gomer, his adulterous wife, and the symbolic power of the marriage to stand as a model of the broken covenant between God and God's people.
- Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's deploying of the language of a broken marriage to expose the broken relationship between the Lord and the Lord's people. The Lord is the wronged husband whose marriage with the people of Israel has been sabotaged by his bride's unfaithfulness.
- Deutero-Isaiah (40-55) moved towards a view of covenant-love as unshakeable and unaffected by human faithlessness. This prophet had suffered the pain of exile in Babylon and as a result of that experience he had come to believe that God would never again allow such affliction to befall the covenant people. His hope for a renewed covenant is poignantly expressed by means of a prolonged marital metaphor. Israel the once barren, deserted wife will now have an abundance of children.

Neither Jesus nor Paul uses the term *covenant* in relation to marriage. However, since *covenant* comes to be increasingly qualified by *steadfast love*, it is appropriate to include in the present section part of the well known analogy from Ephesians 5 between husbands and wives and Christ and the Church. The text has been used in the past to legitimize a range of practices which today are rightly questioned, including the divine legitimation of the submission of wives to husbands, and the alleged *metaphysical* indissolubility of marriages. The text incorporates a *household code* or *Haustafeln*¹ but in this case the conventional relationship between husbands and wives has been partly transformed by profound theological reflection (Thatcher 1999:75-77).

Members of the Christian community are to *be subject to one another out of*

¹ There are three household codes in the New Testament, Ephesians 5:21 - 6:9, Colossians 3:18 - 4:1, and 1 Peter 1:18 - 3:7. Similar material is found in 1 Timothy 2:18 - 3:7, 6:1-2, Titus 2:1-10. A household in the ancient world would be hierarchically ordered, from the male householder, down through to his wife, children, slaves and other property.

reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:22). But the exercise of mutual subjection throughout the community as a whole should not tempt us to suppose that the power which some members have over others because of class, status or gender, is being substantially redistributed. *Wives are to be subject to your husbands as though to the Lord* (Ephesians 5:22). The conventional wisdom of subjection to husbands is now given a theological rationale by means of two tightly related analogies. Subjection of wives to husbands is required -

for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ is the head of the church. Christ is, indeed, the saviour of that body; but just as the church is subject to Christ, so must women be subject to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:22-23).

All three household codes in the New Testament teach the subjection of wives to husbands. Keeping modern feminist criticism of subordinationism in mind, the fact that our moral sensibilities today have been sharpened over a span of two millenia and should not give us licence to find fault with those who, two millenia earlier, did not share our enlightenment. The "norm" provided by New Testament Christianity -

is not necessarily the specific command or injunction, but the sensitivity to what was appropriate and practical and right and witness-bearing within the social constraints at the time - their "healthy worldliness" (Dunn 1996:60, 63).

Mackin (1989:71) translates the participial ὑποτασσόμενοι (literary, *being subject to*) as *defer to*. Since the example to be followed in subjection to husbands is the subjection owed to Jesus Christ himself, the inferior position of the wife in the marriage appears to be divinely sanctioned. As it is between man and woman, so it is between Christ and the Church. The writer introduces into New Testament theology an entirely new insight. The individual relationship between husband and wife *within* the Christian community is to be understood alongside the transcendental relationship of Christ *to* the Christian community. This is then unpacked by means of the familiar metaphor of the Church as the *body* of Christ.

The first use of the analogy is the simpler one: *The man is head of the woman, just as Christ is the head of the church*. *Head* appears to mean leadership of the marital community of two, just as head of the Church means leadership of the ecclesial community

of many². But the author does not lose sight of the analogical character of the argument. The remark that *Christ is, indeed, the saviour of that body* might equally well have been used analogically to suggest that the husband is the saviour of the wife. While he does not say this, deference to husbands in everything along the lines of the Church's deference to Christ nonetheless reinforces the wife's subordinate role in the marriage.

An important question to be raised is whether the redefinition of the role of husbands in the subsequent verses is sufficiently far-reaching and radical to counterbalance the asymmetrical deference of wives. Everyone in the household must act *out of reverence for Christ* (Ephesians 5:21): for husbands this means loving their wives, *as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it* (Ephesians 5:25). While the love of a wife would not have been a surprising thought in the ancient world, the love that is enjoined on Christian husbands here is novel and distinctively and authentically Christian. The author takes for granted that the death of Christ is to be understood as a sacrifice and that the sacrifice is a self giving. The verb *παρέδωκεν* signifies a relinquishing of oneself, a giving over of one self for another (Mackin 1989:73). Husbands are to give themselves to their wives with all the devotion and totality with which Christ gave himself for the Church.

Christ's sacrifice for the Church is next qualified by images taken from bathing - the washing of baptism and the washing of the bridal bath. Consecration and cleansing by water and word (Ephesians 5:26) represent the process of union between the believer and Christ brought about symbolically by baptism. The presentation of the Church to himself as glorious and perfected -

puts Christ in a double role in the imagined wedding ceremony. He is the pronubus, the person who presents the bride to the groom. He is also the groom (Mackin 1989:73).

Jewish readers would be mindful of the Lord's marriage to the foundling girl Israel who is first betrothed and then washed with water by the bridegroom, who then prepares her for the wedding ceremony (Ezekiel 16:8-14). The Lord God's verdict on his bride was:

And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendour I had given you made your beauty perfect (Ezekiel 16:14).

The breadth of the basic analogy between husbands and wives, and Christ and the

² Paul takes for granted that the man is the head of the woman. See 1 Corinthians 11:3.

Church, is expanded by these images to include the new covenant inaugurated by the death of Christ. The new people of God are personified in the single image of the Church. In each case the people of God are depicted as God's bride. Because they are God's bride, they must be made perfect. The bride of the old covenant had splendour bestowed on her by the bridegroom (Ezekiel 16:14). The bride of the new covenant was endowed with splendour by Christ's sacrifice. Nothing more is needed to make her an acceptable bride: the death of Christ has united the Church to himself irreversibly by his self-sacrifice. And the consequence for the Christian life is that husbands are required to love their wives in similar fashion (Thatcher 1999:76-77; Joubert 1996:43-44; Janson 1996; Dreyer 1996).

Paul defines marriage from a Christological and ecclesiastical point of view. With this approach he takes the emphasis away from the separate roles of each partner to the relationship between Christ and his Church that serves now as a model for marriage. If man and woman identify with this image of marriage, it should not only lead to a new way of looking at each other, but also to a new way of conduct, a new style of living, that is based on the couple's relationship of faith with Christ and their commitment to his Church.

A recent example of how the basic contents of the covenant are formulated for today's society is found in the Netherlands. In 1983 the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands worked on a report of a workgroup about sexual relations (published under the title In liefde trouw zijn - "To be faithful in love" = CdP). In this publication they tried to formulate the basic contents of the covenant. Two fundamental motifs are discovered in God's covenant : a liberating and an imperative facet (1983:26). In spite of conflict and suffering God instituted a covenant as a context for love and freedom. This freedom also contains and implies responsibilities before God and our fellow man.

In this basic covenant values of love, freedom and responsibility are consequently applied to all sexual relationships : reciprocity, durability, freedom and safety (1983:33). According to the writers of this report homosexual relationships are seen in a more positive light as long as these principles exist in a relationship. One can appreciate that these writers seek to find responsible norms for sexual relationships in the midst of a secularised society. But at the same time, these norms only function on a horizontal level. As long as men or women act in a responsible way towards each other, any sexual relation is permissible. To what extent is the relationship with God brought into consideration in the human relationship? Love for God and obeying his will can not be seen apart from love of our fellow man. The vertical dimension of God's presence and commitment to our world

through his Spirit should at all times be taken into consideration.

If the biblical model of covenant is to play a central role in a postmodern celebration of Christian marriage, clearly there are elements of it which are simply unserviceable. The survey of the covenant model of marriage quickly uncovered simmering issues of gender and power in the texts themselves. Where the marriage covenant is illuminated by the divine-human covenant, there must be no more transfer of divine power to the man and of human fickleness and infidelity to the woman. There must be no more stereotyping of women as covenant-breakers. Any suggestion of sexual violence must be absolutely filtered out. The theological conviction that in relation to God, God alone takes the initiative must not transmit to the human marriage relation that husbands alone take the initiative. Even in Ephesians 5 the bridegroom is the active partner who initiates the marriage and even prepares the bride for his wedding: the bride is the passive recipient of his ministrations, subject to him in all things. Her perfection and her passivity coincide. Any refashioning of the covenantal idea must first deal with these fundamental difficulties.

Despite these difficulties I remain convinced that *covenant* can and should remain central to the Christian doctrine of marriage, and that it is possible (indeed essential) to state how marriage as a covenant may be commended in ways that are free from sexism and gender imbalance. This will be attempted next by making and qualifying five claims about covenants, each of which builds on the previous one in a cumulative way.

(1) *Marriage is a covenant in the straightforward sense that it is an agreement between two people.* It has not been forgotten that throughout the Bible and much of Christian history, marriage is an agreement between two families, not between two people. *Covenant* is being rooted here in contemporary experience. Beginning with the deep-rooted meaning of covenant as a *binding relationship*, which includes commitment, promises, obligations, durability and concluding or sealing by a rite, marriage fits the description of covenant very well. A covenant in the ancient world is likely to have a god or gods to witness it, thereby acting as guarantors of the agreement and underlining the seriousness of the pledges being made. Almost all Christian marriage services have the opening words which acknowledge God as witness. No partner need promise anything that the other partner does not. So there need be nothing detrimental to the mutuality of a marriage by its being a covenant in this sense.

(2) *Marriage is better understood as a covenant, not as a contract.* Let us take Palmer's contrast between the two types of agreement. While he has probably exaggerated and polarized the differences between them, the general contrast is still useful. He writes, -

Contracts deal with things, covenants with people. Contracts engage the services of people; covenants engage persons. Contracts are made for a stipulated period of time; covenants are forever. Contracts can be broken, with material loss to the contracting parties; covenants cannot be broken, but if violated, they result in personal loss and broken hearts. Contracts are secular affairs and belong to the market place; covenants are sacral affairs and belong to the hearth, the temple, or the Church. Contracts are best understood by lawyers, civil and ecclesiastical; covenants are appreciated better by poets and theologians. Contracts are witnessed by people with the state as guarantor; covenants are witnessed by God with God as guarantor. Contracts can be made by children who know the value of a penny; covenants can be made only by adults who are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually mature (Palmer 1972:639).

There is little doubt that the notion of contract has been more influential than that of covenant in the Christian tradition. It was John Calvin who initiated a covenant theology of marriage. The dominant secular understanding of marriage is that it is a contract and it is irony that while late modern societies return to a contractual understanding which was once the dominant Christian understanding, Christians are rightly discovering the fruitfulness of a covenantal understanding of the essence of marriage.

(3) *Christian marriage is a covenant between husband and wife ratified by Jesus Christ.* The warrant for this assertion is given by an interpretation of Ephesians 5, which seeks to resolve the problems of power and gender. This is how such an interpretation might go.

First, the method of the author is to relate everything that is to what God has done in Jesus Christ. He has been *granted the privilege of proclaiming to the Gentiles the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ* (Ephesians 3:8). It is inevitable that the relationships governed by household codes will get the full *Christological treatment*, for literally everything - including time and history, the earthly and heavenly realms and

everything in them - is understood in the light of God's purpose in Christ. When marriage too receives this treatment, the daring analogy comparing husband and wife with Christ and the Church is introduced. It is clearly possible (and of course desirable) to retain the firmly Christocentric approach to marriage, while at the same time developing this approach in ways more sensitive to gender implications than the author believed necessary in first-century Ephesus.

Secondly, the Ephesian household code, determined by the revelation of the divine love in Jesus Christ, is prefaced by the injunction to the whole church to *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ* (Ephesians 5:21). Mutual subjection within the household is to be understood in the broader context of the theme of subjection in the whole letter, where *all government and authority, all power and dominion* is made subject to Christ, for *God put all things in subjection beneath his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church which is his body* (Ephesians 1:21-22). Subjection to Christ in the community now anticipates the new age when all things will be subject to him. The vexed problem of *headship* is also best dealt with by this author's wider conviction that Christ is head not simply of the Church but *over all things*. The Christian community, which through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:13-4) anticipates the time when God's purposes in Christ are complete, lives that subjection now. Subjection, or if Mackin's term is preferred, *deference*, is for the entire community to express in the quality of its living together in Christ.

Thirdly, the sharing of the vision of how things might look when everything and everyone is subject to the love of Christ might start with the actual experience of contemporary families and households, where there is much evidence of things *not* being subject to Christ, where instead there may be sexual violence, the misuse of male power, the pursuit of selfish individualism, the exploitation of sexuality and the body, and the horrendous neglect and ill treatment of children. Thus relocated, the vision of mutual subjection *out of reverence for Christ* is delivered from the archaic and historically contingent set of hierarchical relationships which were an inescapable fact of life in the ancient world, and which included slaves (Ephesians 6:5-9). It is able to focus instead on the real transformative work required for women and men to love each other as Christ loves them both, and for this love to encompass children and engage prophetically with the new slavery (i.e., the unjust burden of work which state and capitalist organizations alike impose upon their employees). Once subjection is disengaged from gender politics

and reintegrated into the cosmic vision of the ultimate reign of Christ, marriage can prefigure the victory of love over violence that is the hope of Christians everywhere.

(4) *Christian marriage is a covenant between equals, that is, between men and women who without distinction are equal recipients of the love of Christ.* This is a deliberate but simple amendment of the analogies in Ephesians 5:22-28 in accordance with what has just been said about the Christological method of the letter, about the headship of Christ being over everything, and about *subjection* referring prophetically to God's future when the reign of Christ over everything is achieved. Paraphrased, the first analogy, addressed to wives only, says:

wives must be subject to husbands
as
the woman is subject to the man, and
as
the church is subject to Christ.

The second analogy, addressed to husbands only, also implies the subordination of wives. It says:

as Christ loved the church
so
husbands must love their wives.

The amendment, which would remove the subordinationist tenor of both analogies, makes husbands and wives subject equally, both to each other and to the Lord as head of the Church. The first analogy would then read:

wives must be subject to husbands,
and
husbands must be subject to wives
as
the church is subject to Christ.

The second analogy, now addressed to husbands *and* wives, would read -

as Christ loved the church
so
husbands must love their wives,
and
wives must love their husbands.

The amended analogy removes the offensive gender identification of the male marriage partner with the male Christ, and male initiative with divine initiative. It does not remove the gendered requirement that husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the Church. It *adds* the gendered requirement that wives must love their husbands as Christ loved the Church, and thereby removes the further offensive inference that while men are capable of exemplifying Christ's love for their partners, women, who are not leaders and initiative takers, are capable only of subjection (see Farley 1990, chapter 8). It shares the insight earlier in the letter that Christ-like love is the responsibility of all members of the Christian community, since all of them have received the benefits of his sacrifice:

In a word, as God's dear children, you must be like him. Live in love as Christ loved you and gave himself up on your behalf, an offering and sacrifice whose fragrance is pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).

(5) *The human covenant of marriage is a participation in the human-covenant between Christ and the Church.* The analogies of Ephesians 5 and their amendments require a further inference to be made more explicit. The Christian life is not only or even principally an *imitation* of Christ, but also a *participation* in the risen life of Christ, and that means the life of all-embracing love which reconciles everything to God. The interweaving of the human with the divine-human covenant is rooted in the steadfast love which is a mutually affirming partnership. The mutual love in the Christian vision for marriage does not come from nowhere: in its formation, realization, growth and perpetuity, it is an *icon* of the covenant love of Christ for the Church.

Can the covenant between Christ and the Church be understood without a restoration of the very inequality between partners which has plagued covenant models in both the Bible and tradition? And is there not a credibility gap between the Church

understood as the bridegroom of Christ and the Church in its empirical manifestation as divided, hierarchical and uncomprehending? Karl Rahner has addressed these problems, and his solution is commendable. He acknowledges that both institutions, marriage and the Church, continually fall short of what they are intended by God to be. This falling short requires a distinction to be made in each case between the institution as a sign and what the institution is a sign of, that is, the signified. Rahner (1967:210-211) observes that -

What the Church points to is not herself. Rather as sign, i.e., as a socially organised community constituted by a common creed, a common cult and common works of charity, she is precisely the sign of that humanity, consecrated and united by grace ... the grace-given unity which extends far beyond the social organism of the church.

In marriage too there is a gap between sign and signified. A particular marriage can sinfully be degraded into a lie when that which it is intended to manifest and to render present is not present in itself, namely the love that is grace-given and unifying. But despite the failure of both marriage and Church adequately to signify that divine love which inspires and animates them, the basic parallelism between marriage and the Church continues to exist. Both are signs,

at the palpable level of historical and social human life, of the fact that that love is being made effective and victorious throughout the whole of humanity which is the love of God for us and of us for God, the love which comprehends and unifies all so long as no-one sinfully denies it. (Rahner 1967:211).

Rahner places Jesus Christ at the centre of his theology of marriage, but not as one whose male gender signifies power over his bride. Rather, the unsurpassed depth of the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:18-19) is the guarantee of the ultimate victory over the sin in both marriage and Church which makes those institutions damaged signifiers of the love each is supposed to embody.

If these arguments are sound, Christians can continue to have confidence in covenant language. That being so, the distinction between a covenant and a contract helps to express the difference between the Christian and secular alternative accounts of marriage. *Covenant* grasps well what is lacking in the contractarian mentality. The act of

faith and acceptance of risk involved in marriage is well preserved by the phrase *plighting of troth*. To *plight* meant *to promise or bind by a solemn pledge, or to give one's solemn oath*. The contractarian mentality preserves self-interest; the covenantal mentality commits itself to the betrothed. The contractarian mentality protects itself against risk; the covenantal mentality accepts risk and seeks to integrate it into the growth of the relationship. The contractarian mentality anticipates an end to the contract; the covenantal mentality anticipates togetherness without end. 45 The covenant mentality replenishes romantic love with unconditional love. It replaces the endless self-referentiality of modern intimacy, not with an "other-referentiality" which robs the self of individuality, but in a covenant in which each resolves before God to cherish the other in mutual self-affirmation and self-giving.

These covenantal concepts mentioned above are indeed helpful for formulating a theology of marriage and the family, but on their own, they are insufficient. The role of responsibility is often overemphasized to the detriment of grace. In this way the responsibilities to and of the different family members are emphasized without taking into account the grace of a covenantal committed God who is also at work in that family (Müller 1996:48-49, Patton and Childs 1988:100).

4.1.4 A worldly concession

Paul gave advice to the church at Corinth about how to handle an ascetic faction that believed that all sexual experience was wrong. The apostle allows marriage, but as a means of avoiding immorality:

In the face of so much immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband (1 Corinthians 7:2).

It is hard to find a positive evaluation of marriage in this chapter. Its justification lies in avoiding extra-marital sex. It is a concession (7:6). Singleness is preferable (7:7-8, 26). Marriage is for people who lack self-control (7:9). It is second best. *Those who marry will have hardships to endure (7:28)* and anxious care (7:32). Since the Lord's return is imminent marriage is a distraction from doing the Lord's work (7:29-31). Unmarried men and women are *concerned with the Lord's business (7:32-34)*. Married men and women are *concerned with worldly affairs (7:33-34)*. A betrothed man who lacks

restraint is nonetheless permitted to marry his intended bride (7:36-37). If he marries her he *does well*, but if he can manage not to, he *does better* (7:38).

Marriage in this letter is permissible but not commendable. This was to be the position taken by the Western church for more than a thousand years. But while marriage is second best when compared with singleness, a feature of Paul's account of marriage, often overlooked, is the substantial equality of partners within it. He acknowledges that the desire to marry to satisfy sexual desire moves women as well as men (1 Corinthians 7:2). Once married they are under a mutual obligation to meet each other's sexual needs:

The husband must give his wife what is due to her, and equally the wife must give the husband his due (7:3).

The reason for this is one found in the discussion of the implications of the 'one-flesh' model of marriage (see above):

The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband's. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife's (7:4).

Neither is the *anxious care* involved in marriage a one-way flow from wife to husband. Paul takes for granted that the "aim" of a married man is *to please his wife* (7:33) and the aim of a married woman is *to please her husband* (7:34).

If marriage is a concession in Paul, it is to be avoided altogether in Luke. Matthew and Luke (Matthew 22:23-34; Luke 20:27-38) both record an incident in the temple when some Sadducees ask Jesus a trick question. A woman has seven husbands, one after the other, with no children by any of them. *Whose wife is she 'at the resurrection?* Matthew has Jesus answer with a comment about how life will be after death:

In the resurrection men and women do not marry; they are like angels in heaven (Matthew 21:30).

But Luke has Jesus use the Sadducees' question to say that married people place themselves beyond the resurrection altogether:

The men and women of this world marry; but those who have been judged

worthy of a place in the other world, and of the resurrection from the dead, do not marry, for they are no longer subject to death. They are, like angels; they are children of God, because they share in the resurrection (Luke 20:34-36).

Here is an asceticism more severe than that of Paul. People who marry are citizens of this world, not of the world to come, and their married status actually endangers their partaking in the resurrection. These verses are almost entirely overlooked in attempts to arrive at an overall and consistent account of the biblical teaching on marriage. Leaving aside the problem of what was at stake in speaking (against the Sadducees) of resurrection, the verses provide clear evidence for the view that not merely celibacy is better than marriage, but those unwise enough to marry jeopardize their eternal salvation. And, moreover, this view is attributed to Jesus. It seems that even "concession" is too weak a word. Only "avoidance" is strong enough.

This portrait of marriage in 1 Corinthians is more important for its advocacy of celibacy than for a commendation of marriage now. In particular the advice to marry in order to deal with one's own libidinous desires seems an inadequate defence for marriage. Marriage would then appear to function merely as a licence for having sex: that it might be a covenant involving sacrificial love, as in Ephesians, is not considered. The inconsistency in the theology of marriage is itself a powerful argument for the different authorship of each letter. We may also note that the reasoning behind the requirement that married partners must satisfy each other's desires overplays the one-flesh understanding of marriage. While the body of each partner is said also to belong to the other, what looks like equality of access to each other's bodies can only be acceptable if the power of husbands over wives is given up and replaced by power-sharing between them. Without such sharing, the statement that -

The wife cannot claim her body as her own: it is her husband's (7:4)

has put countless wives in extreme danger.

These reservations aside, the temptation to relativize the text as unduly influenced by the belief in the imminent return of Christ must not be allowed to drown out the possibility that, with regard to the preference for singleness over marriage, Paul is actually right. One way of interpreting Paul's characterization of marriage as *anxious care* is to

believe him. While Paul may be optimistic in thinking that unmarried men and women are free from anxious cares, 49 a similar argument that the care of children and the pleasing of one's partner make particular demands which single people do not have seems obviously valid. Perhaps because Western Christians have lived through an era of *mandatory marriage* it is still difficult for many people to realize that the destiny of marriage is far from inevitable. Once marriage is categorized as a *vocation*, the inference can be rightly drawn that significant numbers of people are *not* called to it. Paul uses the term *charisma* or gift in relation to singleness, marriage and temporary abstinence from sex (1 Corinthians 7:7). People who honestly believe they cannot fulfil the obligations of marriage must actively resist any pressure on them to marry. Neither should they think unfitness for marriage is any kind of character deficiency!

Each person has the gift God has granted him, one this gift and another that
(1 Corinthians 7:7).

The hard saying of Jesus that marriage endangers a person's salvation is very difficult to integrate into a positive theology of marriage may be possible to regard this saying as one which helped *to meet the needs and to validate the activities of a group of wandering preachers' in the aftermath of the sack of Jerusalem and the abandonment of the 'eccentric settlements* by the Dead Sea. These words of Jesus may have been appropriated by this *particular small group*. Equally, Christians with a strong commitment to marriage may be too eager to adopt disposal strategies of inconvenient texts. Perhaps one might find in this saying a warning against that kind of absorption in home and family which really is *subject to death*. A perspective outside marriage, such as this text provides, enables elements of family life to be properly criticized as life-threatening, as real obstructions to the gift of salvation. Among these elements may be found an oblivious disregard of the wider world beyond the family, a lack of awareness of the damage which the continual closeness of married life is able to inflict on partners, a lack of awareness of the imbalance of power which remains a problem in many marriages, a spirit of selfishness and possessiveness which the maintenance of an affluent home encourages, and all those other features of marriage which led to the title *unholy misery*.

4.1.5 Passionate mutual love

The Song of Songs provides our final biblical model of marriage. Its delightful, overt, playful, erotic imagery has led to its being either ignored or, under the influence of Ephesians 5, converted into an allegory of the spiritual love of Christ for the Church. The book is a cycle of love songs, accompanied by music and dancing, sung at wedding feasts and other joyful occasions. Christian commentators today generally think of the Song as the "joyous, tentative explorations of love of the betrothed couple, culminating in their marriage and full sexual union in 5:1" (Gledhill 1994:28). This judgment probably reflects the desire to impose on the text an anxiety about the marital status of the lovers, about which the text itself is shockingly indifferent.

It is significant that, as the recitative opens, the young woman is the first to speak:

*May he smother me with kisses.
Your love is more fragrant than wine,
fragrant is the scent of your anointing oils,
and your name is like those oils poured out;
that is why maidens love you.
Take me with you, let us make haste;
bring me into your chamber, O king (1:2-4).*

The woman is the one who first voices her yearnings, her anxieties, her fears and her delights in a much more colourfully expressive way, and more frequently than her lover does. She is the one who invites him to intimacy, she is the one who so often takes the initiative' (Gledhill 1994:93). In contrast to the asymmetry which is a feature of the covenant language of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Song subtly undermines the common typecasting of the male/female roles as dominant/submissive, active/passive, leader/follower, protector/protected, and so on. In the Song we have complete mutuality of desire, boy toward girl, girl toward boy (Gledhill 1994:94, 140).

The intense delight which the lovers take in each other is clearly an end in itself which is not justified by further reference to having children, pleasing God, or anything else.

Fertility and reproduction of the species are themes which barely surface in the Song (Gledhill 1994:134).

The sacrifice of Christ the bridegroom for his bride the Church was described in Ephesians 5 as a divine self-giving. In the Song there is a *human* self-giving, as the lovers give themselves to each other in consuming devotion. The young man speaks of his deep satisfaction in loving the young woman when he says,

*I have come to my garden, my sister and bride;
I have gathered my myrrh and my spices;
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey,
and drunk my wine and my milk (5:1).*

Likewise the young woman, who having given herself to her lover, takes delight in the delight he has received from her:

*My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds where balsam grows,
to delight in the gardens, and to pick the lilies.
I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine;
he grazes his flock among the lilies (6:2-3).*

A further contrast invites attention: that between the natural beauty which the man finds in the woman, and the beauty conferred on the bride by the divine bridegroom of Ezekiel 16. In Ezekiel, he bathes, dresses and adorns her. Her beauty is perfect because of the splendour the bridegroom bestows on her (Ezekiel 16:14). The bride here is praised by her bridegroom as she is. After marvelling at her eyes, hair, teeth, lips, neck, breasts, he cries,

*You are beautiful, my dearest,
beautiful without a flaw (3:7).*

Song of Songs proclaims the joys of human love. We have had good reason already to note that the love of God is found in the deep, playful, mutual and erotic love the young man and woman have for each other. In this milieu the woman takes the initiative

in making love and expressing her feelings at least as often as the man. The woman of the Song is equal to the man in everything. Her *persona* as an overtly desiring (and black) woman is perceived neither as sinful, nor as threatening. There is no extrinsic justification for their love. The garden of their love may be a deliberate reversal of the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. *There is no expulsion here; no constraint or curse in the Song; no taint or shame.* The unity of this couple subverts the gendered humanity of the fall, of Ezekiel and the household codes.

This model is particularly appropriate for a generation of men and women still influenced by awkwardness and embarrassment in relation to their bodies and the bodies of others. While there is strong evidence that many contemporary people have more than overcome their parents' and grandparents' reticence to discuss or to admit to enjoying sexual experience, most Christians are still not encouraged to link sexual intimacy with the intimacy of faith. Connections are still not being made between sexuality and spirituality. Consequently, as the delights of mutual love are sampled and explored, these stirrings and intimations of human love are experienced without reference to the source of all love, poured out in the love of God for all things in Christ. Since divine love always surfaces in human love, the ongoing divorce between sexuality and spirituality means the most potentially fruitful experience for a person to discover, and grow, in faith, is repeatedly missed (Thatcher 1999:101).

4.1.6 Vocation

Marriage, understood as vocation, is a response to some purpose beyond its nature. It begins with God's gracious call, rather than (as with its sacramental view) with an order of creation. Marriage as a process of nature is clearly subordinate to the grace that comes through the response to God's call to renew creation. Married people and families are to serve God by carrying out their vocations. Marriage and the family facilitate this by stabilizing and supporting those involved. The equality of the couple comes through their common call to discipleship, but (as in Barth) the roles they carry out in that call may be static, socially determined, and apparently less affected by grace than the model itself suggests (Patton & Childs 1988:83). For Patton and Childs (1988:101) the specificity of vocation is that it is -

a process conception of life and marriage that claims that its meaning is discovered on the journey rather in the way that the journey was begun . . .

Marriage understood as shared calling, is not an attempt to live up to ideals but a commitment to be intimate in the real world.

4.1.7 Communion

The symbol of communion stresses the resonance of two natures and the mutual participation of both in a world they hold in common and the qualities each has as a person. The symbol has its origin in mystical experience and involves grace, operating through given structures of personality. In taking nature seriously it stands close to a sacrament, but lacks the external or permanent symbolic structure typical of sacrament. It is less likely to stress the influence of church over nature, and demands the sociological condition of equality, psychologically presupposing an orientation toward growth and fulfilment, rather than control or the carrying out of presupposed functions. The communion model seeks to energize persons in their marriage and family relationships, so that they can accomplish their vocation, live out their covenant, and participate in the sacrament of life. Rather than trying to transform them directly or to approach them as instruments or members of a community, the communion model tries to give them power to reveal themselves to each other so that in the resonance between their real selves they might be transformed to higher levels of living (Patton & Childs 1988:83).

4.1.8 Redemption

According to this view of marriage, sex and the family, Christians are called to live out of the reality of the redemption. Christ freed man from the bondages of sin and for this reason we don't have to be dictated to by sin in living out our relationships. Taking Christ's redemption from sin as a point of departure, a strong emphasis is placed on the couple and on members of the family to conquer sin in their lives.

The redemption from sin, and consequently the call to conquer evil, is a fundamental truth of the Gospel. As such it has to form an integral part of a family therapy. Paul is employing this same strategy in Romans 12. After explaining the content of the Gospel in the first 11 chapters, he starts with the words : "Therefore, I urge you, ...". An appeal must and can and could be made because of the redemptive work of Christ. But Paul does not begin his letter with Romans 12. What he says in chapter 12 only makes sense after reading the first 11 chapters.

If redemption does not contain both elements, i.e. redemption from guilt and

redemption from the bondages of sin, it is not a message of true redemption. People easily accept the message of redemption from sin, but they don't experience redemption from the bondage of sin. They feel that that aspect is their own responsibility. For this reason the Christian message of redemption, for them, is a heavy burden that is imposed on them. The freedom which ought to be experienced in Jesus Christ is overshadowed by a new law.

The work of redemption of Jesus Christ can also be wrongly applied to marriage, sex, and the family. Through preaching and in the therapeutic context people are called in the name of Jesus Christ to perfection. It becomes the Christian variant of the popular psychology model which has its point of departure in the growth potential of man. The solution is in you, you just have to unlock it with a commitment to the ideal of a fulfilling life. It is the same appeal, this time in the name of Christ, but this is not the Gospel (Müller 1996:49-50).

All these views contain an aspect of the truth and should not be disregarded. Being familiar with them is important for the pastor who offers premarital pastoral care, because each view contributes to one's being able to talk about what marriage ought to be.

The pastor, as one representing the tradition of the church, is in fact saying to the couple : "In what way is your relationship developing in a sacramental way ? In what way do you share a common call and direction in life ? In what way is your covenant together related to the larger covenant of God with his people ? In what way are you developing as equal partners in your intimacy with one another ? In what way do you accept and experience the redemption from guilt and from the bondages of sin in your relationship together ? Which of these normative symbols for the marriage of Christians is most present or is missing from the way you understand your relationship?" These questions enable a couple in storying their relational narrative in relationship to The Story represented by the Church, her tradition and by the pastor who is trying to assist the couple interested in marrying or in contemplating marriage.

4.2 STORIES OF PREMARITAL CONVERSATIONS

The premarital conversation is more than just giving out information (theological or psychological), of how a couple ought to live. Taking the above mentioned chapters in consideration, we can say that a postmodern approach will be culturally relevant (2.7.1

Realities are socially constructed), encourages participation, develops both experience and understanding (chapter 3), validates all the different biblical portraits of marriage (4.1 Biblical portraits of marriage), senses the importance of past, present and future, and is localized (local knowledges).

To understand a narrative approach to a premarital conversation, it is useful to see how different schools of thought interpret and undertake "marriage preparation" or "premarital counselling".

As I have already mentioned, this approach moves away from an educational and instructive approach towards "marriage preparation". The goals of marriage preparation according to three researchers, which fit into this educational approach, will be briefly outlined below. It does not mean that these approaches are wrong, but a narrative approach entails something else (see especially the next chapter, but also other case studies presented in this reading). I will give three examples of what I mean by *these* other approaches. The approaches that I mentioned in 1.7.2 *Personal experience* could also be added here.

1) According to Schumm and Denton (1979:24-25) until recently only three approaches to premarital preparation have been used (Mudd 1957; Nash 1970).

The first, approach, generalized education preparation, is exemplified by family life education in high schools and colleges, as well as home economics extension programs.

A second approach, identified as therapeutic counselling, is designed to meet the needs of couples presenting specific and often distressing problems. In the literature, this approach is primarily presented in terms of case studies rather than in a systematic or theoretical manner.

The third approach, instructional counselling, has traditionally been the province of the pastor, rabbi, and physician. The goal of this form of premarital counselling is to prepare couples to make realistic adjustments to their expectations of marriage by providing them with information and exposure to a variety of frequently occurring marital problems.

Programs have tended to focus on sexual adjustment, marital roles, relationships with in-laws, wedding plans, and religious concerns. Couples are usually counselled privately, although groups of couples may be present together for sessions that are

primarily educational. Systematic evaluation of such programs is infrequent even though couples often complete written questionnaires to evaluate their "compatibility."

A fourth approach, the enrichment approach, has been promoted based on the premise that equipping couples to deal with their own concerns is more useful to them in the long run than merely conveying information and advice. Enrichment, as defined by the *Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment*, involves the enhancement of couples' commitment, communication, and skills in conflict resolution (Mace 1978). Aspects of the enrichment paradigm have been incorporated into several premarital programs (Miller, Corrales & Wackman 1975; Gurman & Kniskern 1977). Although most of these programs focus on the process component of human interaction rather than on the content aspect (Gleason & Prescott 1977), many do not give sufficient thought to the components of commitment and conflict resolution, resulting in reduced effectiveness (Mace 1978).

In an earlier work Mace (1975:12-13) states that the shortcomings of marriage preparation programs are that they transmit knowledge, and that the "missing element" to be effective is that marriage preparation must move decisively from the impartation of knowledge to the investigation of personal and interpersonal dynamics - and not only to the investigation but also the facilitation of necessary behavioural change over a period of time. They employed five settings for their marriage preparation : (1) the provision of reading material for the couple, (2) a lecture to a class or group, (3) an instructional interview with a couple, (4) an investigative interview with a couple, (5) the supervised group interaction of several couples.

2) According to Glendening and Wilson (1972:551) premarital preparation and counselling should,

- a) help participants gain insights into themselves and their relationship,
- b) provide techniques for maintaining and enriching relationships,
- c) give the couple a positive experience of going for help together,
- d) give the couple the opportunity to be aware of and to practice the expression of feelings, and
- e) share the belief that a deep emotional relationship brings joy.

3) Bagarozzi and Rauen (1981:13-14) mention the goals of a standardized marriage

preparation program of the *Philadelphia Marriage Council* :

- a) to provide education and information about married life to couples contemplating marriage, and,
- b) to help prospective spouses work through interpersonal difficulties they are experiencing at the time.

They themselves then propose (Bagarozzi & Rauen 1981:25-26) that marriage preparation programs should include the following :

- a) To provide prospective spouses with the opportunity to become aware of and discuss the developmental tasks that they will face in the early stages of marriage.
- b) To teach couples a variety of behavioural tasks that will enable them to successfully resolve these developmental tasks and make structural changes in their relationship. These skills include, but should not be limited to, conflict negotiation, problem solving, communication training, and positive behaviour change strategies.
- c) To provide the couple with the opportunity of re-evaluating their decision to marry.

They stated that the most frequent conceptual inadequacies in premarital counselling are the failure to articulate a theory of family process and/or family development which serves as a rationale for the selection of program contents and procedures.

In a later article Bagarozzi and Bagarozzi (1982) offer some conceptual guidelines for designing and implementing premarital intervention programs and for evaluating their effectiveness. They believe that for any premarital intervention program to be successful it must be guided by a theory of family intervention which insures the development of those structural characteristics that are essential for the maintenance and stability of any living system. A premarital intervention program must also provide for the development of interactive processes within the system which contribute to its growth and viability (1982:53). For this, they used the concept of family development tasks which consist of eight content areas. Each content area can be thought of as being comprised of structural and process tasks which both participants must negotiate and resolve if they are to build a viable dyadic system. The eight content areas are : (1) marital roles and tasks, (2) finances and financial decision making, (3) sexual relations, (4) in-laws, (5) friends, (6) recreation, (7) religion, and (8) children. Within each of these eight content areas,

couples are asked to discuss a variety of sub-issues. In order to facilitate these discussions, couples are taught functional communication skills. This is the first process task that each couple is required to master before being permitted to go on to the next phase of training.

Upon successful completion of this requirement, couples are taught collaborative problem solving techniques, conflict negotiation techniques and contingency connecting as means to achieve fair and equitable marital exchanges. Participants are taught to use these skills in addition to communication training, because communication skills, by themselves, are not considered sufficient to equip couples with the tools needed to resolve their differences successfully.

Upon the completion of this second group of process tasks, couples are ready to discuss and negotiate their differences in each of the eight content areas of married life where difficulties often arise. The sub-issues that couples are asked to address are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of concerns. However, they can be considered to represent a sample of important decisions which most couples will face during the early stages of relationship development. The mutually satisfying resolution of these issues in the dyadic phase of family formation is crucial to the successful resolution of successive developmental tasks, because they represent the foundation upon which a viable family system is built (Bagarozzi & Bagarozzi 1982:53-54). They then go on to illustrate how the discussion and resolution of specific sub-issues contribute to the development of functional family structures and processes (Bagarozzi & Bagarozzi 1982:54-62).

Buckner and Salts (1985) propose a premarital assessment program which -

goes beyond providing information by seeking to make the couple aware of the strengths and weaknesses in their relationship. The program will help clarify potential problem areas and help the couple realize their own personal resources in solving these problems (1985:513).

Their assessment model, unlike therapeutic counselling, is not limited to meeting the needs of couples presenting specific problems. It is applicable to all premarital couples. Assessment provides the opportunity for a couple to re-evaluate and confirm their commitment and decision to marry. Furthermore, this assessment program provides training in specific skills for the beginning marital and family therapist (Buckner & Salts

1985:513). In order to achieve these goals the following areas are covered : (1) dating history of the couple and some parent information, (2) expectations, goals, roles, needs of each individual and of the couple, (3) family, children, finances, friends, recreation, (4) meeting with the parents of the couples, (5) communication and conflict resolution, and (6) values and sexuality (Buckner & Salts 1985:514).

Possibly the most well-known marriage preparation program (and marriage enrichment program) is *Prepare/Enrich* developed by Olsen and Olsen. The initial development of the *Prepare/Enrich* scales was based on the theoretical as well as empirical indicators of the critical issues and common conflict areas in marriage. A major category and assessment scale was then developed to assess each of these conflict areas for couples. They fall into four general groups: *Personality issues*, which are individual characteristic; *Intrapersonal issues*, such as personal beliefs and expectations; *Interpersonal issues*, which include communication and relationship issues, and *external issues* which are outside factors which affect the couple's relationship (Olson & Olson 1997:2). The following table describes the common conflict issues and the corresponding Prepare/Enrich areas:

Common Conflict Issues	Prepare/Enrich Areas
<i>Personality issues</i>	
Expressing self	Assertiveness
Self esteem	Self confidence
Denial / Avoidance	Avoidance
Control issues	Partner dominance
<i>Intrapersonal issues</i>	
Idealization / Social desirability	Idealistic distortion
Personality / Habits	Personality issues
Incompatible values/beliefs	Spiritual beliefs
Interests / Activities	Leisure activities
Expectations	Marriage expectations
Satisfaction	Marriage satisfaction

Interpersonal issues

Communication	Communication
Arguments / Anger	Conflict resolution
Children	Children and Parenting
Commitment	Couple closeness
Marital roles	Role relationship
Sex /Affection	Sexual relationship

External issues

Relatives / Friends	Family and friends
Money / Work	Financial management
Family issues	Family closeness and family flexibility

The *Prepare* program was originally developed in 1978 after the authors encountered difficulties in working with premarital couples. The initial idea was to create a couples questionnaire which would get the couple talking to each other about their relationship. By including in the questionnaire relevant issues for couples, it was hoped that they would begin discussing and even resolving some of these issues before marriage. After the initial questionnaire was developed, a research project was designed to determine the impact of a premarital inventory and counselling for couples. These findings lead to further development of the *Prepare* Inventory and more clearly defined feedback sessions. It has been revised three times (1982, 1986, 1996). In 1996, major revisions were made in the *Prepare*, *Prepare-MC* and *Enrich* inventories and they were expanded into the *Prepare/Enrich Program* with six couples' exercises. The goal of the program was to build on the strengths of these well-designed inventories, and add a more comprehensive skill based program for couples (Olson & Olson 1997:3).

Improvements to Version 2000 of the *Prepare/Enrich* inventories

- Major item revision with 40% new items and 30% revised.
- 30 background questions with 15 questions on abuse.
- Four newly created personality scales.
- New typology of couples with 4 premarital types and 5 marital types.
- Expanded focus on family-of-origin and couple system using Couple & Family map

(Circumplex model).

- Six couple exercises.

The *Prepare/Enrich* program is designed to facilitate the communication within each couple about meaningful issues in their relationship. The program has six goals and one couple exercise for each goal. The program is designed to increase their awareness of their relationship strengths and growth areas and provide them with relationship skills so that they can improve their relationship. The program includes first taking a relevant couple inventory (Prepare, Prepare-MC, Enrich or Mate) and then getting feedback about their results from a trained counsellor.

According to Olson and Olson (1997:19) the strength of this program is that it begins with a comprehensive couple inventory. The couple takes one of the above mentioned four inventories which have been designed to maximize their relevance to couples in different stages of their relationship. The inventories have been scientifically developed and have a high reliability, high validity and large national norms with couples from various ethnic groups. The inventories are based on system theory and the Circumplex model of couple and family systems.

The program does have some limitations. The inventories are lengthy with 165 items and 30 background questions. People with a low reading level would have some difficulty in completing the inventory. It is also required that both partners in the couple relationship take the questionnaire, and it is not designed for individuals with very severe emotional problems. Neither is it useful for couples experiencing intense marital conflict.

The South African theologian Daniel Louw (1993) also develops in his book Liefde is vir altyd (*Love is forever*) a guide for marriage preparation and marriage enrichment. According to him a marriage is an art of love and a gift of God's grace. The key to discover marital happiness and renewal is to be amazed about the gift of grace to be married and to be committed to master the art of love (Louw 1993:9).

The purpose of his guide is -

- to help couples evaluate their marriage,
- to motivate couples to be committed to their marriage,

- to develop knowledge about self, the other and God,
- to give a description of what is mature love,
- to master the technique of in depth communication,
- to give guidelines for conflict resolution,
- to discuss how to handle tension,
- to give suggestions how to enjoy each other's bodies,
- to remind a couple of the importance of continual growth of their relationship.
- In the end he gives a five point plan for a marriage enrichment course.

A central part of his guide is questionnaires that could be quite useful, although the same criticism could be given as that of Olson and Olson (above). I found that couples are very hesitant to complete questionnaires and prefer discussions. Louw touches on a variety of relevant issues, but at the same time it is very lengthy and quite intellectual for the average couple. A solution could be that a couple chooses certain subjects that interest them and then they can be discussed.

4.3 COHABITATION

What are churches to say and do about the widespread practice of cohabitation prior to marriage, inside and outside the membership of the church? The "cautious" acceptance of cohabitation by the *Reformed Church of France* (see below) is referred to and commented. The general acceptance of this "new entry into marriage" by the society and certain churches is discussed from the point of view of the changing value systems in society. A possible theological response is also proposed.

The fact that there exists numerous different forms of cohabitation also complicate the pastoral approach towards this lifestyle. The reasons that motivate people to choose this way of life are so diverse that it is difficult to make general "judgements" or conclusions. People living together have a large range of motivations, which include reasons of a philosophical nature (e.g. contesting the *status quo*), financial convenience, uncertainty, fear, or just a refusal to be tied down. Within the church context this implies that we ought to apply an ethical pastoral analysis appropriate to each individual case.

The question concerning cohabitation also concerns the place of sexual relationships. When proposing the order *marriage, sex and the family* one could ask if the

order of these terms used is correct? Which comes first - sex or marriage? I am deliberately choosing this order to propose a certain theological perspective of marriage. This choice is made in spite of a great variety of psychological, philosophical and theological discourses concerning certain lifestyles represented by different orders of these terms.

From my experience with couples cohabitating, they start to think about marriage when they start to think about having a family. An article recently appeared in a quarterly review of the *Family Planning Movement* of France stating that single people who don't practice their need for physical sexual satisfaction are not normal and could have certain psychological deviations. This is a so-called biological-natural point of view. One has then to conclude that marriage is the constitution of a relationship that *de facto* already exists and in which sexual intimacy already exists. Although marriage today is devalued in this way, I am of the opinion that marriage is the truly sensible context for a sexual relationship. This is the reason why I choose to use the given order of the terms. Using this title I am opting for a particular value: sex for the sake of marriage, and not marriage for the sake of sex. It is only from a relational ethical approach that we can talk sensibly about intimacy and sexuality. The family follows then as a valuable consequence of marriage and sex. A family is not constituted as a result of sex between people. Something that is formed in this way is more of a breeding flock and not a family. A family can only be constituted after a marriage is orderly contracted (see Müller 1996:43).

Because of the sex-dominated society in which we live, it might seem necessary to devote a whole chapter to sexuality, but I prefer rather to develop a theological hermeneutic of sex where the emphasis is placed on the relationship between sex, marriage and the family. Sex is not a separate issue, it is always relational. It never has implications for only one person, but always implies at least two people (Müller 1996:43). From a narrative point of view, which includes social constructionism, a sexual relationship between two people also has to do with the social relational context in which they live, and is therefore also determined by these other relationships in which they participate. I could even consider the following order : society, family, marriage, sex. A wedding is contracted between two people who did not fall from the sky, but are the products of a particular social context which determines the way in which they interact intimately. Of course, one could argue "which one came first, the chicken or the egg?" It is important that a theological-ethical value in terms of sexuality should be stressed from the beginning. This value-oriented approach towards sex brings us in direct confrontation with

the current trend in Western society.

Russell-Jones (1993:31-35) writes about the "Madonna phenomena" which can be considered as an expression of what is happening in Western culture:

In modern times the body has been pitted against the soul as an agent of desacralization and demystification: the physical has taken centre stage explaining and displacing the spiritual. What has happened, however, is that the body itself has taken on sacred significance: it has simply taken the place of the soul as a mythical court of appeals, as dogma and a plan of salvation. Its discovery which for a long time was a criticism of the sacred and a struggle of man against God, takes place today under the sign of resacralization. The cult of the body is no longer in conflict with that of the soul. It follows upon it and inherits its ideological function'. The vast industries connected with health, fitness, beauty, and entertainment all testify to the pre-eminence of the body in contemporary culture.

This shift should be gladly accepted, since the dualism between body and soul is no longer sustained, and especially not with God on the side of the soul against the body. Neither should the opposite ideology with God on the side of the body against the soul be supported. The relationship between God and man in the context of sexuality should be approached in a total differently way.

As an example I will present a pastoral situation³ that demands a pastoral response. Through this presentation I would like to present a Pastoral narrative involvement in a situation where theological ethics are concerned. This could also be seen as a response to the relativism sometimes imposed by Postmodernism (see also 2.7.4).

Jacques, 30, and Marie, 25, have been cohabiting for two years and are planning to get married some time in the "near future". Marie is also two months pregnant. Jacques is an accountant and Marie a high school teacher. Jacques was married before and got divorced after four years of marriage. This happened four years ago. Both of them are non practicing Catholics, but decided to approach a Protestant church to talk about their situation, because of the problems surrounding remarriage in the Roman Catholic Church

³ The couple contacted me after a priest of the RCC didn't want to marry them. The conversation took place at the Reformed Evangelical Church of Montpellier in June 2000.

(RCC), and the fact that Marie is pregnant. Both of their families are Catholic, although only their mothers are "sort-of" practicing Catholics. Both of their parents experience their cohabitation, pregnancy and the fact that Jacques is divorced in a negative light ("How will they ever be able to get married in the Church?").

Jacques and Marie decided to live together two months after they met. Despite the fact that their friends accepted this as normal, it created tension between themselves and their parents - until finally they moved away from their parents to a nearby town. Jacques and Marie were divided emotionally about their cohabitation and the fact that Jacques was divorced (and is still "married" according to the RCC), but they decided "not to think about it". During the conversation it came to light that this aspect of their relationship had more influence on their relationship and their future plans to get married than they thought.

It could be said that they made a kind of cost-benefit analysis of their situation. On the cost side, if they continue to live together, (a) the tension between themselves and their parents would continue or even get worse, (b) if they want to get married they should regularize Jacques' divorce with the RCC, because their parents won't accept a wedding in a Protestant church, and (c) their hidden guilt concerning all this would continue. On the benefit side, (a) they would not just conform to the beliefs and ideas of others. If they conform now to the ideas and beliefs of others (parents, Church) it could create expectations to do the same in the future. (b) The above mentioned "costs" would also be resolved.

I took note of their attempt to sort out their options, but starting to make an inquiry into the history of their family of origin by mapping their personal relationship history through using the genogram, ecomap and couple lifetime line (see 5.7.4). They came from middle-class French families. Jacques is the eldest of two children (he has a sister who is five years younger), and Marie is the youngest of three children (she has two elder brothers. They are two and three years apart). Both of them were baptised as children in the RCC and followed the catechism of the RCC. Their mothers wanted them to be "good Catholics because it is the right thing to do". Jacques experienced a lot of tension with his parents from his adolescent years especially concerning the fact that they "want to impose values on him that were outdated". He now interprets his first marriage in this light as a kind of breaking the bond with his parents. Marie had a close relationship with her mother, sometimes "too close". They shared a lot of life aspects and a relationship of "big sister/little sister" was established.

The issue presented here is an ethical one and is often overlooked or consciously avoided by a pastor or counsellor in order not to be labelled as a "moraliser". In a situation like this the pastor should keep psychodynamic perspectives in mind as horizon and background in his ethical considerations. The essence of Pastoral Care is found in addressing the religious-ethical dimensions of human problems with an equal consideration for the dynamic-motivational issues as well.

Out of my own experience, I found that all the couples who attended the marriage preparation program of the RCC cohabited, whereas the couples attending the marriage preparation weekends organized by MVF and coming from a more evangelical background did not. Risman et al (1981:77) refers to findings of research that college students who cohabit tend to be less religious than other students.

Du Toit (1996:69) argues that in past years the church could assume that marriage was the only acceptable way to live out individual sexuality within society, but that this is no longer the case in the last decade of this century (for France, it has been the norm for at least the past three decades). A number of different ways of living out one's sexuality have arisen, for example, gay unions and cohabitation. Cohabitation, for example, has become an alternative form of family life and needs to be considered theologically and psycho-socially.

Gerdes (1988:218-219) writes that the reasons for increasing incidence of cohabitation can be traced back to economic and practical factors, such as the need to share accommodation and, in the case of older couples, psychological factors such the needs for intimacy and affection, particularly because of loneliness and a dislike of living alone (especially after a divorce or the death of a spouse). Cohabitation is also seen as a way of being in a more equal relationship, and a help to those who do not feel ready for a lifelong commitment. Hence, cohabitation is essentially a relationship of convenience, which serves as a temporary alternative to marriage. Sometimes it is referred to as a trial marriage.

During the marriage preparation sessions of the RCC an important factor that contributed to the decision to marry, was the decision of having children. This is also confirm by the study of Leridon and Villeneuve-Gokalp (1988) conducted by the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED). This reason is given in spite of the fact that 43,7% of children where born out of wedlock (called "natural" children in France) in 2001.

When asked about the reason(s) for cohabitation, the majority said that they didn't consciously give it much thought. It just happened naturally.

The belief that cohabitation is an important prelude to marriage rests on the assumption that cohabitation serves to screen out potentially incompatible partners more effectively than does traditional courtship. By living together, relationships that do not work terminate before marriage occurs, and the more successful relationships continue on to marriage. This approach would lead us to expect that premarital cohabitation improves marital quality and stability. Although this is a reasonable proposition, several investigations have found the contrary to be true : those who cohabit prior to marriage have been shown to be significantly lower on measures of marital quality and to have a higher risk of marital dissolution at any given marital duration (see DeMaris and Rao 1992 for a list of research done in this regard; Bennett et al 1988:127). Booth and Johnson (1988) conclude from their study that couples who cohabit are more prone to accepting and expressing "unconventional" life styles. Their assumption is that a person who engages in one form of unconventional behaviour is more likely to manifest another. These couples also show a lower commitment to marriage which contributes again to a lower marital quality than those who do not live with their partner before marriage (see also Bennett et al 1988:128, 137; Schoen 1992:281; Risman et al 1981:77, 78). This might give an explanation for the 50% divorce rate in France in 2003.

4.3.1 The changing value system

After reflecting theologically about marriage, I would like to make some remarks concerning the changing value system of our (French) social context. Since we are formulating a particular approach from a social constructionism point of view, it seems necessary to outline some thoughts concerning the values underlying the choices couples make for their life together.

In spite of the various discourses that one can have about cohabiting, sexuality and marriage and the family, and the order in which they should occur, there are couples living together without being married who are serious and who have thought deeply about their choice of living together. We could call their point of view, since we don't have another expression, "an ideology of free love".

Sometimes it has happened that during a conversation with a couple living together without being married that I have defended the institution of marriage stating that if they really love each other they would get married. Many a time this statement has been greeted with a smile ! Why ? They consider that this free engagement claims a vision of love more profound and more demanding than that of a married couple ! They say that they refuse to enclose love in an institution that they judge to be impoverishing and demobilizing. They prefer a commitment that needs to be reconfirmed each day, that can't conceal love's weakness behind the screen of an institution. They claim that love is free, or it does not exist at all !

From this point of view, life together as a couple should be an intense exchange on the levels of affection and intellect. The relationship comes to an end when fervent love, enthusiasm and fusioning diminish.

In 1984 at the national synod of the *Reformed Church of France* pastor Robert Grimm, one of the spokespersons on Protestant ethics concerning marriage, read a report on the evolution of morals which he called a "transmutation of moral values" and the "emergence of a new ethical sensibility" (Grimm 1984:2-3). These transmutations can be resumed as follows (Grimm 1984:68):

- The pre-eminence of love above the institution of marriage, of the affective above the legal;
- the priority given to the present above the duration, to the intensity of a relationship above the repetition;
- the weakening of ideas of promises and of commitment, in the name of freedom and authenticity;
- the pre-eminence of the idea of the couple above that of the family;
- the diminishing of religious practices, and the emergence of a different manner of understanding obedience.

It is for this reason, according to Grimm, that these "free" couples, non legalised, transmit also, in their own way, an ethical message that married couples should hear and take into consideration. The synod now considers marriage and cohabitation as being two possible equally respectable expressions of the same Christian "conjugalité".

Sullerot stated in a report she prepared for the *Economic and Social Council*

(1984:29-32) that marital status started to change in 1965. One notices a considerable fall in the number of marriages and a constant rise of cohabitation in different forms, together with its legal consequences. According to Sullerot the reason for this is that certain principles were abandoned and others were consecrated:

- The following principles were abandoned or became weaker: the idea of the sacred, respect for the patriarchal hierarchy, respect for the institution, the power of legitimacy with regard to filiation and succession, the principle of personal commitment;
- the following principles were promoted: personal liberty, the respect of the personal interests of each partner as an individual, the equality of each partner of the married couple in terms of their relationship towards each other and their relationship towards their children, and the equity between the children born within-wedlock, out-of-wedlock and adopted children.

Sullerot (1984:92-95) claims that the main impetus for change of contemporary values and the installation of a new value system came about after 1968. The principles of this new value system can be expressed as follows:

- The idea of an interdiction in the context of sexuality is totally rejected. Sexuality is exclusively personal and should be developed in the context of individual freedom. The idea that the sexual act can imply or lead to an official commitment or social status, is rejected. Sexuality can not be subject to social imperatives.
- From this flows the idea that there is an obligatory tolerance towards the behaviour of others. The only response towards the behaviour of others is : "It is his right!" This attitude could even go so far as not being able to insist on faithfulness in a relationship, each partner being free to do as he likes.
- There is a preference for the couple above the family. It is the couple who constitute the official union. The desires of the couple are the beginning and end of all things. Having a child is seen as a building block of the couple's relationship. This makes the couple relationship very fragile because it contains high expectations and unconscious demands. Regarding this point of view Grimm (1984:70) in a study done for the *Reformed Church of France* underlines that there is a certain preference for a "theology of the couple" rather than a "theology of marriage".

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- Security is no longer important - neither affective nor material security. Neither partner is seen as being capable of providing for these demands. How can I take an oath today and maybe tomorrow it will be a lie, or how can I make a promise today, if I don't know what I will feel tomorrow. These securities which are linked to marriage are sought elsewhere - work, the State, i.e. to make sure that we receive that which is our right. Parents are also seen as a refuge. Each partner visits his/her parents separately for a week-end or for the holidays. Contact with the parents of the other partner is almost nonexistent. For this reason, when these couples marry, in most cases engagements are not celebrated (Amongst the almost 60 couples who attended the marriage preparation program of the RCC, only one couple had had an engagement). In this regard Risman et al (1981:82) quote Rapaport who argues that marriage rituals ease the transition to marital roles, but that less ritual is needed when there is more premarital intimacy. I will explore the importance of these rituals in the next chapter. Regarding Rapaport's second claim, I found that the opposite is actually true, i.e. if we consider only the financial aspects of weddings today. Depending from one congregation to another the couples attending the sessions of the RCC could participate in the order of service for their wedding ceremony by selecting Bible texts, other texts (like poems), songs, and personal witnesses during the service. In some cases, a lot of originality was shown (see also next chapter).
 - The duration of the relationship is not important. The intensity of the relationship is most important. If this intensity becomes less, if the flame diminishes, if silence becomes part of the relationship there is no reason to stay together - it will be hypocritical and unhealthy. Concerning this aspect, Lemaire (1997:335) considers that the notion of duration is fundamental for the formation of a couple relationship.
 - Commitment is viewed as suspect. There is a superstitious fear that if we pronounce the words "I promise you that . . ." this will cause everything to fall apart. We make future plans to buy a car, to buy a house, to go on holiday, but we cannot respond to our feelings for tomorrow or the future. We cannot decide today that tomorrow or the years to come can be consecrated to one person, to love only one person. It seems impossible to mobilise our will for that.

Sullerot (1984:61 ff) gives six reasons for this "new" lifestyle:

- Economic factors: the prosperity of a higher lifestyle.
- The development of contraception and abortion.
- Social factors like urbanisation, mobility, anonymity, and the changing attitudes of parents.
- The influence of the media in creating scepticism towards marriage.
- The reduced influence of religious practise resulting in the desacralisation of marriage.
- The feeling that, in a society of continuing mutation, one is overtaken by the time and the rhythm of these changes. This results in an intense investment in the present, without looking back or ahead.

Sullerot then concludes with this interesting thought - which she unfortunately does not develop further: Shouldn't we consider this questioning of marriage - coming from Jewish-Christian thought - as another symptom of a profound spiritual crisis in our society? Are the declining in the number of marriages and the development of cohabitation not also signs of a spiritual emptiness and a loss of meaning? If life and death have no meaning, why bother constructing a value system? Involuntarily it makes one think of the words of the contemporaries of Isaiah: "Let us eat and drink, ... for tomorrow we die!" (Isaiah 22:13b).

Another major change in society has to do with the *passage from duties/obligations to rights*. Since the beginning of time the traditional couple was more oriented towards the reproduction of life from one generation to the next, i.e. towards biological, material, cultural and spiritual succession. Because of the inevitability of death, always prematurely possible, and the *frailty of existence*, it was necessary for the individual to step aside for the benefit of the group. The survival of the family imposed certain obligations on each member and elevated duty to the level of virtue. Few events were linked to personal decision. Mortality and fertility were regulated by fate. Happiness was relative, necessity reigned and expectations were very limited. These norms were interiorized and accepted as natural. A couple's relationship and family life could be summed up in two words: *survival and transmission*.

Because of this, family relations were defined by duties and obligations : the duties of the husband and those of the wife, marital obligations and the duties of the children.

This was the binding family relationship. The obligations of each family member corresponded to a specific role that they played and this role gave them a certain identity. Church education often regarded these duties as *sacred* and elevated them. In this way, the wife had to find her identity in her role and duty as a mother. It was very difficult for her to build an identity outside of this role. This led to a confusion between her *social role and personal identity*.

Since the 1950-1960's life expectancy in the West has increased considerably and this has resulted in certain fundamental changes within family relationships. From 1920 to the present day couples life expectancy has increased from 14 to 44 years.

Each person can now exist as a true individual with his own rights, without endangering the life of the group. Relationships are no longer understood in terms of obligations, but in terms of individual rights. This emergence of individualism has destabilized the relationships within couples. Human rights have become *individual rights*, "*my rights*". The tendency is to forget the universal to the advantage of the individual.

Marriage is now lived in respecting the autonomy of each individual. The relationship is no longer dictated to by a moral or social imperative, but is claimed as a free choice, i.e. a decision to love. The couple have moved from a *prescribed union* to the management of a *mutually consented union*. From this perspective, when the sentimental union disappears, couples disintegrate far more easily than before. This partially explains the incidence of separations and divorces early in marriages. The fragility of these unions also reflects the importance of the relationship to the couple.

The fact that relationships are now based on individual rights means that *expectations have grown* and along with that *frustrations* have increased. Contrary to the traditional system in which the individual found his identity in duty accomplished and in his role allotted by society, now each person - liberated from these ancestral constraints - carries alone the weight of his existence and his identity. Of course, we have chosen the criterion of "happiness", but what kind of happiness are we talking about? To choose happiness, also means to choose uncertainty and fragility - not because this choice is bad, but simply because it brings with it new demands and new difficulties.

According to Erich Fuchs (1979) this new form of relationships, which emphasizes the liberty of the individual, is the result, from a moral point of view, of the ideology of a

capitalist consumerism society. A couple's commitment resembles an investment based on the flexibility of money: money is invested where there is the most profit gain, and withdrawn when there is a profit loss. In the same way we invest in marriage or a relationship as long as it has advantages for our own personal enrichment.

A way to avoid this kind of narcissistic egoism is to *anchor* a couple in a *story*. It is a long term perspective which prevents a lapsing into extremes. The *story* allows each one to be enriched and to participate in the common project of their relationship.

This is of great importance since a couple's expectations are becoming more and more excessive. According to the sociologist Gérard Mermet (2002), our society is moving from a *society of consumerism* to a *society of consolation*. We consume in order to be consoled, to fill an existential emptiness. Not being able to place our relationship in the future, we take refuge in a present filled with "good things". This attitude is also found in the context of marriage where each partner "consumes" the other: there is an over-investment in the relationship with each partner expecting the other to fill their existential void.

However, in spite of these tendencies of today's society, for many sociologists, the growth of individualism does not mean the end of institutional marriage. The desire for autonomy is not the cause of rupture, but, to the contrary, it encourages *the revival of relationships*. 'Living together' today, is being "free together".

Ultimately, contemporary couples, with these new characteristics, are both more captivating/endearing but also more fragile. They resemble a machine which, in becoming more complex, is becoming more fragile, but at the same time also more effective/outstanding (Poujol and Duval-Poujol 2003:7-10).

4.3.2 The public character of marriage

In order to understand marriage in its correct context, especially with regard to cohabitation (see 4.4), some remarks should be made about the public character of marriage, as marriage is not only a private commitment between two individuals, but also a commitment within society. You can find people living together without being married who have committed themselves privately to each other. The fact that there is no official

commitment does not mean that there is no commitment. It could be possible that such a private commitment is stronger and more authentic than an official commitment made in public because of social conformity.

Johner (1997:22) cites the following definition of marriage:

Marriage exists, in the real sense of the word, when a man and a woman decide to establish their love relationship in the time and in the social context to which they belong, and that they testify to this decision by publicly committing themselves to one another. The society of which they are members recognize and respect them as such, and commit them (the society) again, from their side, to the couple. (free translation - CdP)

Marriage is not only the commitment of the couple vis-à-vis society, but also and at the same time the commitment of society towards the couple. It means that the society should recognize the couple's new social status, and recognizes from now on the two as one new entity (and not two individuals living together).

André Dumas (1983:82-83) states the following :

The second function of marriage is to emphasise the choice that two beings have made to love each other. It is always a public ceremony, involving witnesses. It communicates to society a couple's intention to discontinue one life style and their mutual commitment to another. Marriage is the "unclandestinisation" (i.e. making public of) of the love for each other.

If Christian young people (in France?) have great difficulty today in recognising the importance of marriage, is it possibly the result of the negative side of a certain ideology of secularism⁴ that "untaught" (made them forget) them to consider the public implications of their faith ?

The union between a man and a woman has been clothed in many different forms according to historical and social contexts, but there was always this one constant that it is a commitment of the couple towards the society to which they belong (Fuchs 1979:183).

⁴ France is a secular state, which may seem like nothing extraordinary, but the French understanding of this principle led, for example, in the beginning of 2004 to the law against the wearing of the Islamic veil and other religious signs in public schools.

And even in certain cases - for example in certain ancient patriarchal societies - the society committed itself to the couple.

According to biblical data, several details confirm this idea that the commitment of the couple, or of the fiancés, had a public character. Of course, we do not find a 476th command that states "You must have a civil wedding". I have already mentioned that we do not find a systematic discussion of marriage in the Bible - as with many other ethical issues. This gives us an opportunity to think about the multiply functions of the biblical text.

We can take, for example, the important role that the father of the bride played, without whose consent the marriage was not possible. This role was of such importance that we could ask if marriage in ancient Biblical times was not rather a contract between two families rather than between two individuals.

Consider the intervention of the elders in cases where the virginity of the woman was debated. Deuteronomy 22:13-21 explains what should be done when a husband claims that he wife was not a virgin when he took her as his wife. This was a public affair!

Several parables of Jesus concerning weddings indicate that it was a public affair (Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24, for example)

We could also think about the meaning of the dowry: this dowry that the husband, according to Jewish law, had to pay to the family of the bride did not have the negative meaning that we give it today. With the dowry, the future bridegroom symbolised his commitment by giving to the family of his future wife an important part of his wealth. Following on from this, the marriage had important financial and succession implications for the families concerned, of which the State was an eyewitness. There was no private event.

In the laws of the Old Testament we find reference to the role of the elders, who took the place of magistrates in cases related to the marital covenant, for example, adultery, or in a dispute concerning the virginity of the bride (Deuteronomy 22). In these cases, the people concerned were referred to the elders, today they are replaced by judges and magistrates. Disputes of this nature, in spite of the fact that they concerned private affairs, could not be settled by the individuals concerned, nor by the respective families, but only by the civil authorities of the time. There was nothing private about this.

In the same way, according to Romans 7:2 it was the law (Jewish or Roman) that bound a woman to her husband.

The theologian Henri Blocher (1984:125) states:

We could continue to evoke the role of the rites and the splendour of the celebration of weddings to which Jesus makes reference in several parables. These rites were eminently social practices that had the implication to bring marriage out into the open and showed society that marriage was the issue and not some other form of relationship. By means of these rites marriage became a communal event understood by everyone. By means of the celebration the whole village was associated with the wedding. No one remained uninformed. In this way, the whole society became a witness to the occasion.

To be, to exist, marriage must be a public act. Today the bans of marriage are still published. This is not just an extra, optional act, but an essential element of the nature of marriage itself.

Thus, we could say that the union between a man and a woman is not based on some or other ideal, but form part of the social context in which it finds itself. The couple has eyewitnesses in order to be recognised by the society in which they live. The meaning of the civil marriage is that it gives a particular status to a man and a woman, by which the relationship is made public and by which each partner is committed to one another in front of witnesses.

It is true that the civil wedding does not always have the splendour that one wishes. Being aware of the austerity of civil "liturgies" certain magistrates try to give more splendour to civil weddings. But to change the situation for the better, a lot still has to be done, especially in the big cities, as the following testimony shows:

The large wedding hall on the second floor of the City Hall of the 18th district of Paris (...). In one hour, ten couples had already paraded to pronounce their ceremonial 'yes' after standing and listening to the four articles of the Civil code. 'We have tried to add a more personal touch to the occasion in spite of the number of weddings celebrated each Saturday,' explains the assistant magistrate, who is concerned about the image of his stronghold. 'We refuse to do what is done in certain suburbs, where after the reading of the Civil Code all the couples say yes in unison before parading by to sign the register'. All the couples receive the same treatment. Or rather the same

timing : 4 minutes 13 seconds. Maximum time : 8 minutes 38. No more time is necessary to read the 4 articles and to sign at the bottom of the register. The elected representatives of the people try hard to alleviate the administrative rigour by sharing with the happy newly weds some nice words and giving them their family record book, and most important of all, a greeting card from the Mayor of Paris. Coming down the stairs of the City Hall, the newly weds just have time to make a wish: that the duration of the ceremony is not a prediction of the duration of their union (Témoignage chrétien 10-16 October 1988, n° 2309 - free translation CdP).

In spite of its imperfections, the celebration of the marriage remains an important action for society. The marriage celebrated in front of witnesses marks the visible entry of the couple into the status of husband and wife. According to the actual civil law it also recognizes the parental authority of the father, and, consequently, the child is assured of having the lawful right to two parents. As a result, marriage can be viewed as social cement. This is very important as children born out of wedlock, more or less recognized by the father, have to choose between the father's name and that of the mother, and they are uncertain as to who has parental authority over them. These cases are becoming more and more frequent.

Since the French revolution marriage is a civil action. The church has been silenced and its only remaining function is to welcome couples who want to ask God to bless their union (Hoareau & Hoareau 1995:5.32-5.33).

But the difference between marriage and cohabitation is not only a question of *form*, i.e. that the content of the two ways of living together is the same, but the one takes place in public and the other one not. Marriage is then only "cohabitation with a ceremony". The difference between the two is situated in relation to the *form and the content of the supposed commitment*. In "most" cases of cohabitation the partners stay faithful to one another, *as long as they stay together*. The difference with marriage is that *duration* forms an integral part of the public commitment of the couple. This aspect is an inviolable principle of marriage on which the marital relationship is built. Sullerot (1984:91) refers to a study done amongst 18-25 year olds and states that they advocate a relationship which consists of an intense exchange of sexual and affective experiences and intellectual ideas. A relationship ends when these intense feelings of "being in love", of

excitement and of "fusion" - feelings that justify a life together - start to diminish. For this reason, many of these young couples choose to cohabite in order not to be swallowed up in the marshlands of routine. In this way, they can break-up easier when things seem not to be working out and when they get bored with one another.

Even though cohabitation and marriage may share certain similarities, they represent two different lifestyles of living together, because they are built on two totally different foundations. In the one case, there is a preconditioned, public and definitive gift of one to another to build together their relationship "until death do us part". In the other case, a temporary self giving and delight in the partner and his/her qualities as long as the compatibility is "felt" (or until they come to decision that it is eventually worthwhile to make a life long commitment of faithfulness).

In spite of many couples living together before getting married, pastors have made the following observations concerning couples (Christians and non-Christians) who came to ask for a church blessing of their marriage (as a previously remarked, in France the state marries a couple, and if they want to, they can have a church blessing of their marriage *afterwards*):

- For many couples the civil ceremony seems to play a secondary role in relation to the religious ceremony. They only consider to be married after the religious ceremony.
- Certain wedding liturgies contain the phrase: "I now declare you husband and wife" pronounced by the pastor, even though the magistrate has *already* pronounced them "married in the name of the law" (article 74 of the Civil Law).
- In most cases, when the couple enters the church the bride is led in by her father and the bridegroom by his mother as if they considered that they were not yet married.
- These behaviours show a certain ambiguity amongst couples: marriage is a social and public act in front of a magistrate, but, at the same time, for many also a religious experience. It is not easy to make a distinction between that which is cultural, religious and historical.

4.3.3 A Theological approach possible?

Browning (2000:93-100) proposes four guidelines for the practice of Pastoral Theology in situations like this that consists of a religious, an ethical and a psychodynamic perspective. In some cases where the psychodynamic dimensions are dominant, and the

religious and ethical dimensions less so, and if the pastor knows how to articulate the way that they are operative, the counselling being offered is nonetheless pastoral in the proper sense of the word.

1) Pastoral Theology should be understood as narrative hermeneutical response to the major themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with special regard for the implications of these themes for a normative vision of the human life cycle.

To understand Pastoral Theology as a type of narrative hermeneutical response will have great clarifying consequences for a variety of pastoral care ministries, especially those ministries such as institutional pastors or pastoral psychotherapists who must articulate their role before various professions and constituencies within the public world. It is difficult for pastors to explain intelligibly to a doctor or social worker their role identity in confined confessional terms. It is better to articulate one's faith assumptions in a more public and narrative hermeneutical language. And it is certainly better to do this rather than lapsing into the jargon of the Social Sciences, due to discomfort with confined confessional language. Browning proposes a revised correlational method of Pastoral Theology (Practical Theology of care) analogous to the revised correlational method proposed by David Tracy in the arena of fundamental theology (Browning 2000:93). The revised model critically correlates both questions and answers found in the Christian faith with questions and implied answers in various secular perspectives (the Human Sciences, the Arts) on common human experiences.

The pastor in this case should understand his task in a public and narrative hermeneutically articulated way. If the pastor chooses to guide the couple to get married rather than living together, it will be better if he can defend his stand publicly, i.e. narrative hermeneutically, although the starting point of his position may be grounded in faith. It should be, as always, faith seeking understanding. A purely confessional view of Pastoral Theology will no longer serve the pastoral minister functioning increasingly within the context of a pluralistic and secular culture.

2) Pastoral Theology must attempt to discern and articulate the relevance to care of both the religious dimension of common experience as well as the explicit faith themes of the historic Judeo-Christian tradition (Browning 2000:94).

This proposition follows directly from the first. If Pastoral Theology is to have a public character, it must concern itself with both the explicit themes of our historic faith as well

as the tacit religious dimensions of everyday experience.

The desire to care for another person, as expressed by a pastor or a secular therapist, presupposes certain attitudes of a religious kind. Deciding to care for another person assumes certain convictions that that person is worth valuing and caring for, not just for certain instrumental purposes, but intrinsically and with regard to some wider, if not ultimate, standard of value and worth. A variety of contemporary philosophers and theologians (Stephen Toulmin, David Tracy, Schubert Ogden, Bernard Lonergan, Paul Tillich) have argued that all of our finite judgments about both truth and value presuppose limit-experiences and a "limit-language" about wider measures of the true and the valuable.

If Pastoral Theology can be hermeneutical enough to discern and articulate the limit-assumptions (which could be compared to faith assumptions) behind every act of care, pastoral practitioners can take their place more comfortably in the various pluralistic contexts that characterize contemporary ministry in both its specialized and generalized forms. In the above mentioned situation the pastor may want to ground his care for the couple under the rubric of the love and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. He should be aware, however, that this faith assumption is not altogether different from the limit-assumptions that the secular therapist makes. Even the secular therapist must answer the question, why do I care for this person? Why is this person worth helping? Why am I obligated to help? These questions point to limit-assumptions that taper off into religious faith. The pastor is fed by both sources of faith - those of common experience and explicit religious tradition. The difference between the pastor and the secular therapist is not that the one has faith and the other doesn't; it is rather that the pastor has the additional resources of a specific religious tradition. Recognizing this fact makes it possible for the pastor to take his/her place more gracefully in the contemporary pluralistic situation characterizing the helping disciplines today.

But the fuller task of Pastoral Theology is to give narrative hermeneutical expression to the norms for the human life cycle explicitly found in the major themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Once again, it should be a matter of faith seeking understanding. Our task is to state the norms not just for the faithful (although certainly for them), but also to determine whether these norms have general public meaning, that is, whether they have general significance even for those who are not explicitly Christian.

3) Pastoral theology should understand itself as an expression of theological ethics, primarily concerned with the religious-ethical norms governing the human life cycle (Browning 2000:96).

Pastoral Care is frequently seen as a religious enterprise, but we overlook the fact that it is also an ethical enterprise. Yet how do we proceed? What are our ethical methodologies? Once again, a philosophical or moral-philosophical perspective may help us sort out our theological-ethical options and do so in such a way as to communicate our stance in a reasoned way to our pluralistic moral situation. First, what does a couple base their ethical thinking on? In spite of the couple's traditional religious convictions (despite of their "vagueness"), their style of ethical thinking is often anything but classically religious in character. Often their cost-benefit analysis is a kind of teleological thinking. Teleological moral thinking tries to answer the question of what we should do by trying to determine which act will bring about the greatest amount of good over evil. The teleologist is always interested in consequences; the moral thing to do is that which will bring into reality the greatest amount of good consequences when good is given an amoral (although not immoral) meaning, such as when we use it to refer to good health, good music, good food, and good times.

At first glance, one might think that the couple is a teleologist of a specifically utilitarian kind. With their cost-benefit analysis they are trying to calculate the good over evil that will come about as a consequence of different courses of action. Utilitarians invariably get involved in such calculations. But this couple is not in the full sense of the word utilitarian, as we will soon see. They are much closer to another kind of teleological thinking - an ethical egoist perspective, typical of so much of the ethical thinking in the contemporary cultural situation.

They are not a totally utilitarian couple because they are not doing their calculations - their cost-benefit analysis - with the good of the larger community in mind. A utilitarian always does his or her calculations with the larger community in view, trying to determine which act or rule, if followed, will produce the greatest amount of good over evil for the largest number of people. The couple is not doing this. They are doing their cost-benefit analysis in terms of the amount of good or evil that will accrue solely to themselves. This is the kind of ethical thinking that a teleologist of the ethical egoist kind invariably ends up doing. We should be reminded that some ethical egoists do things that indirectly create good for others, but they always do them primarily because of the good

that will come to them. The couple is an ethical egoist in that sense. Each of the values that they are weighing has significance first of all for themselves; as of yet, they have asked no questions about the welfare of their families and the larger society.

The pastor has enough ethical sophistication to know that his own point of view is considerably different from that of the couple. Although a Protestant, he agrees with the classical Catholic position about the sanctity of marriage. But he also believes that the Catholic position puts too much emphasis upon the institutional form of marriage (see 4.1.2). It overlooks the possibility that God may cherish other values such as the natural dynamics of love (see also Müller 2002:23-32). The position of the pastor tends toward a mixed deontological and teleological position. The deontological approach to ethics tries to establish the right of some first principle or intuition that is deemed intrinsically morally independent of consequences. The divine commands of God are all examples, in their different ways, of deontological approaches. The pastor's mixed position was deontological in that the sanctity of marriage was for him both a revelational and intuitive given; it was teleological, however, in that he felt that this value, although always central, must sometimes be balanced with other values as well. But one can ask, what other things does God value in addition to this kind of expression of love between two individuals? Example, the qualitative aspects of a love relationship, etc. Hence, the chaplain's position would allow for the possibility of cohabitation, but not on narrowly egotistical grounds.

This pastoral care situation, where cohabitation is the primary focus, is used here only to illustrate a range of ethical issues that pastoral counsellors have been ignoring. Many other situations and many other issues could have been used. But this illustration alone is sufficient to raise a host of important issues. How does the counsellor now proceed? Does he take a thoroughly educative approach and let them solve this problem within their own mixed ethical-egoist and conformist values? Does he try to move them closer to his own way of thinking? Is their developmental history important? Does he need to attend to their feelings, their motivations, and their psychological makeup? What kind of helping relationship should he offer them? How do the religious perspectives discussed above affect this relationship? How does the ethical perspective just mentioned affect the relationship? These questions carry us into the last sections of this discussion and the heart of pastoral care - the practical judgment involved in bringing these religious and ethical perspectives together with the particularities of their situation, the strengths and

weaknesses of their personality, and the initiatives and responsibilities they are likely to sustain.

4) Pastoral Theology should be concerned with specifying the logic, timing, and practical strategies for relating, theological-ethical and psychodynamic perspectives on human behaviour (Browning 2000:98).

The pastor's ethical outlook led him to believe that getting married was the most responsible course of action open to them. At the same time, he ended his interview believing that, for psychodynamic reasons, the couple was strongly attracted to the idea of getting married. But time was of the essence. A decision had to be made soon. He concluded the interview by offering to have two additional conversations. In these conversations he hoped to widen the range of their moral thinking so that they would begin to consider, in addition to their own individual needs, their needs as a couple, the needs of their families, and finally the needs of the larger community. In addition, he hoped to broaden their ethical thinking while at the same time attending to the complexities of their own developmental history.

On the moral level, the pastor believed that there were arguments against getting married. Their conception of themselves as a couple living together, the unlikely possibility of getting assistance from their families, their lack of financial resources, the possible negative effects on their relationship, and finally the place of the baby in the larger family context, led the pastor to have certain reservations, although he affirmed the sanctity of marriage, and the creation of a stable context in which the child can grow up. In addition, he held the conviction that modern society had already spawned too many alienated and emotionally deficient individuals and that the welfare of the social whole argues rather for the happiness of individual.

But there were indications, he thought, that the couple was deeply attracted to getting married. The mapping of Jacques' developmental history, for example, led to the hypothesis that Jacques was mildly narcissistic. The pastor felt that what seemed to be an oedipal (which, according to Freud, leads to the formation of the superego which is the source of the moral and the religion) relationship between Jacques and his mother was probably superficial. He hypothesized that the real developmental issue was the early narcissistic blows dealt to his self-esteem by his father who constantly criticized him for mistreating his younger siblings. The mother's later appreciation helped compensate somewhat for earlier narcissistic deficits. But having little understanding of what was

really happening, Jacques developed the strategy of enhancing his self-regard through taking care of others who needed him. This led, the pastor thought, to an early marriage. This same need might also, he believed, be behind his wish "to have a child."

All of this the pastor held only for a moment. He did want to speak with them further. He hoped that in getting to know them better, he might gain a clearer idea about how to bring their moral discernment and their dynamic self-understanding into a closer relationship. He did not wish to take the role of a therapist, but he did want to promote both moral and psychological growth. For the next session, he planned to guide them into discussing their deeper feelings about the possibility of getting married before the birth of the baby. If it emerged that this option did not feed into Jacques over determined needs to be wanted and depended upon, the pastor then hoped to raise some carefully phrased questions designed to suggest additional moral possibilities. He could ask if they had thought about the welfare of the child, the strain it would place on them, etc. At a later date, the pastor was prepared to share simply and without airs of moral superiority his own moral views and the reasons he used to support them. In this way, he hoped to launch a process of moral inquiry that would at once be undogmatic in tone and dynamically sensitive to both the complexities of their developmental history as well as their level of moral thinking.

4.4 CONCLUSION

In this fourth chapter we continued our journey on the road of narrative practice that leads to a new way of being and a way of seeing the world in which we live.

We investigated how this road was paved by its predecessors and how it can lead to various interpretations and different destinations. From the narrative path we went to the pastoral path, and from there we described man and the working of the Spirit in the life of man.

These principles lead to a specific understanding of marriage and marriage preparation. The implications of postmodernism, as discussed in chapter two, the hermeneutical pastoral approach as discussed in chapter three, and the biblical portraits of marriage, as discussed in this chapter, have certain implications for the way that cohabitation and marriage preparation programs are viewed and practiced. Flowing from

the above discussion the following traits for a Christian understanding of marriage after modernity could be derived:

- (1) Marriage would remain central, not peripheral, to the Christian understanding of sex and love. It would be an institution of mutual self-giving.
- (2) There would be no abandonment, but rather a recovery of many of the traditional meanings of marriage.
- (3) In contrast to modern individualism a social view of the human person as a person-in-relation is commended.
- (4) The primary model of love suggested for Christian marriage is the divine-human love rooted in the divine Trinity.
- (5) One's identity as a Christian and as a person is not simply a lifelong project but is conferred by being with others in relationship. Marriage is considered as the exemplar of what being with another actually means.
- (6) A positive developmental assessment of Christian tradition (not merely the Christian marriage tradition) was urged. Tradition, combined with a modicum of reverent imagination, liberates by showering us with new possibilities which are forever old, forever new.
- (7) The model of a lifelong covenant with one person was commended as a core meaning of marriage; and
- (8) the claim was made that while patriarchy was redundant in marriage after modernity, religious faith was a positive necessity in providing the ethos of permanent commitment and deepening love.

In the next chapter the narrative ideas of Michael White and also Freedman and Combs - taking into consideration the views portrayed in this chapter - will be used to propose a premarital narrative conversation. Some of these ideas will be illustrated by certain examples taken from actual conversations.