

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Autumn 2009 No. 114

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COMBINED MARRIAGE AND BAPTISM

By David Phillips

Over the summer silly season the Church of England's Liturgical Commission issued an outline order for a combined service of Baptism and Marriage. As an alternative the Marriage service can include a service of thanksgiving instead of Baptism.

One complaint about this is that the Liturgical Commission keeps producing services for all sorts of occasions. This point was made in the production of Common Worship – there is just too much material. This means clergy spend disproportionate amounts of time on preparing services which deflects them from evangelism, teaching and pastoring. It also becomes harder to keep up with what is being put out with the consequence that some of the material that got in on the tail end of Common Worship is far from satisfactory theologically. But it also seems to return us to the medieval period where the rules concerning services were so complex that people had to have large manuals to help them understand what they could or should do at certain times.

This particular outline proposes to combine two distinct events, marriage and baptism. The rationale seems to be that this is something couples want and some churches are already doing it so the Liturgical Commission should regularize it. As is well known couples are increasingly coming to be married who have children already and very often these are unbaptised. The argument is that the Church can create a nice family occasion and do both together. But this is to confuse two very distinct and definite events which it is far better to keep separate and prepare for separately. We do have a duty to marry and baptize in certain circumstances but also a duty to set before people the teaching of God from Scripture on these matters.

The point the media picked up was that the Church of England is moving to endorse parents choosing to marry only after they have lived together for some time and had children. It is no good the Church protesting that this is unfair, the message that it has put out over the recent years is thoroughly mixed and this last service proposal only confuses matters more. The Church is simply not being heard because its voice is so muddled.

It is important therefore to keep saying and saying clearly that we are all created by God and He has also instituted marriage for our benefit. The only proper place for sexual union and the bearing of children is within the marriage relationship of a man and a woman. People do fall short of this standard and we should not only welcome people choosing to marry but encourage them to do so whilst being clear in what is God's commands.

It is sad and deeply frustrating that at a time when family life is collapsing with all the dire consequences for children, education and the fabric of society, that the Church of England is not heard to speak with a clear voice but rather seems only to create more confusion.

A sacrament?

Some of the news reports described marriage as a sacrament. It is not surprising that journalists should make this mistake because it is the Roman Catholic view and some in our Church claim the same thing. The Roman view is tied in to their claims about the power of the Church and priesthood but has no warrant in Scripture. Others talk of marriage being sacramental rather than a sacrament, which is another way of confusing people. As most readers will know the official Church of England teaching, found in Article 25 of the Thirty-Nine Articles, is quite clear:

“Those five commonly called Sacraments, that is to say, Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and extreme Unction, are not to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel, being such as have grown partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles, partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures; but yet have not like nature of Sacraments with Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God.”

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