

Marriage and family in view of the doctrine of the covenant

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New emerging paradigms in Western culture have produced a new ethic. Not only social ethics in general but the ethics of marriage and family life are changing rapidly. This new ethic has *inter alia* a strong bearing on marriage and family life, relationships explained by traditional Christian ethics. The traditional idea of heterosexual official marriages is challenged by new forms of civil relationships such as cohabitation, temporary relationships and civil unions between gay couples. Scholars even speak of the postmodernist marriage that, according to them, differs entirely from the traditional Christian idea of marriage. This article focuses on the concepts of marriage and family life against the background of the emerging postmodern and post-secular ethic and its consequences for the traditional view of marriage as a biblical institution. The central theoretical argument is that the concept of marriage in the biblical testimony should be defined and developed within the doctrine of the covenant and that such a view, with certain modifications, can still provide ethical directives and new perspectives on marital life for Christians today.

Introduction

Nowadays, modern Western culture is defined in various ways. The term *postmodernist* has become a popular description of modern modes of thinking, writing and conduct since the term was coined by Lyotard (1991, 2004). Postmodernism denotes a movement away from positivism and rationalism, and towards a new appreciation of the relativity of truths and norms, and the importance of the recognition of pluralism. Although there is much disagreement about what postmodernism really entails, few scholars will disagree with the broad description of Baron (2003:583–585). He maintains that postmodernism is a critique on all forms of foundationalism, such as objectivism, universalism, rationalism and the certitude about truth and knowledge as professed by the Enlightenment. It can be described as a radical questioning of all established beliefs and ideas. In addition to Baron's view, it is also fair to say that postmodernism also questions the character and validity of tradition, including the traditional institution of marriage and family life.

Other evaluations of contemporary Western culture have also emerged. From the perspective of the Western Christian religious tradition and secularism, Habermas and Ratzinger (2005) and Habermas (2008, 2010) describe contemporary society as post-secular and maintains that modern Western society features a new interest in spirituality and religion, but not the institutionalised religion of the past. Another description of Western society that has emerged in modern times is the concept *post-ecclesiastical*, which aims to describe the modern movement away from the organised and institutional church, towards a Christian faith based on personal religion without institutional roots for this phenomenon see Hauerwas 2013:ix–xi; Niemandt 2007:38; Ward 2002:13).

These definitions of the spirit of the time have the common denominator that modern Western society has moved into a new cultural paradigm in which new values determine human conduct. A new ethic is emerging. This new ethic has *inter alia* a strong bearing on marriage and family life, as these relationships were explained by traditional Christian ethics. The old idea of heterosexual official marriages is challenged by new forms of civil relationships, such as cohabitation, temporary relationships and civil unions between gay couples. Scholars even speak of the postmodernist marriage that, according to them, differs entirely from the traditional Christian idea of marriage (Van Eck 2007:83). Marriage is seen as a social construct that is fully determined by various historic and contemporary cultural situations and has nothing to do with biblical concepts such as 'the sanctity of marriage' (see Dreyer 2008).¹

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1. In another research article, the author has discussed the notion of marriage as a social construct as this concept is proposed by Dreyer and others. The hermeneutics underlying the argument as presented by Dreyer (2011) is evaluated and confronted. Over and against this point of view, the author made a case for a view of marriage as a covenantal reality in view of a biblical theological hermeneutics. This argument is further pursued in the present article (see Vorster 2015).

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This article focuses on the concepts of marriage and family life against the background of the emerging postmodern and post-secular ethic and its consequences for the traditional view of marriage as a biblical institution. The central theoretical argument is that the concept of marriage in the biblical testimony should be defined and developed within the doctrine of the covenant and that such a view, with certain modifications, can still provide ethical directives and new perspectives on marital life for Christians today. This article attempts to further the arguments displayed in the large corpus of research on covenantal marriage in the recent Christian ethical discourse on this topic (see Tarwater & Jones 2004:1). The discussion will commence with a concise overview of the doctrine of the covenant as it developed in the Reformed tradition.

The doctrine of the covenant and its social consequences

The concept of the covenant is one of the major themes in the biblical revelation. The covenant denotes the special relation between God and humankind and between people, and is deeply embedded in creation. Creation has a purpose and this purpose is revealed to be covenantal relations between the created and God, as well as human beings with other human beings. This idea is foundational to the Reformed tradition and was developed into an ecclesiastical doctrine under the influences of Luther, Calvin and Barth, on the basis of the theologies of the most prominent church fathers (see Roberts 2007). In the later developments of the Reformed systematic theology, the idea of a covenant was developed into a doctrine. This doctrine entails a creational covenant of works with Adam and a covenant of grace in Christ. On creation, God entered into a legal pact with man that includes all the requirements and obligations implied in creaturehood (Berkhof 2003:215). The monogamous marriage is part of this creational order, although polygamy was part of the culture of the people of God. The practice of polygamy is *described*, but monogamy is *prescribed* as the order of creation (see Witte 2015:1675).

Due to the fall in sin, the covenant of works was abrogated in the sense that the relation between God and humankind became distorted. However, the covenant of works is replaced by the covenant of grace. In the covenant of works, God appears as Creator and Lord, and in the covenant of grace, as Redeemer and Father. The content of the new covenant of grace is the promises of God, which find fulfilment in the coming of Christ and his triumph over sin (Berkhof 2003:277; Van Genderen & Velema 1992:493). Many Reformed theologians from this tradition have regarded the idea of the covenant as the central theme of the biblical revelation. In recent times, due to the work of Ridderbos (1969) and Van der Walt (1962), the focus has shifted to the concept of the kingdom of God as the central theme. This author also accepts the paradigm of the Kingdom, but acknowledges the importance of the idea of the covenant as the biblical foundation for all human relationships within the parameters of the Kingdom. An opinion in this regard is expressed in

another recent publication (see Vorster 2014). Human relations were imminent in the concept of creation.

Of special importance in the doctrine of creation and the resulting establishment of relations is the fact that God created humans in his image (*imago Dei*) and thus granted them dignity (Calvin 1559, Inst. I:15:1). This inherent dignity was blemished, but not completely destroyed by sin. As dignified creatures, humans became related to God and each other. Barth (1961:116) has furthered the argument of Calvin and contends that God created an image of himself and entered into a relationship with this image, which is humankind. This relation is expressed by the concept of the covenant, which is established by God in Himself from all eternity and will be fulfilled by Him in time (Barth 1961:3). The idea of the covenant entails that humans are dignified and relational beings and that these qualities determines the ethics of all human relations.

Regarding the Old Testament theology, Vriezen (1966:167) explains that the community between the holy God and humans should be seen as the character of theology in the Old Testament. This relation is expressed by the vast descriptions, explanations and revelations regarding the idea of the covenant. The reign of God is a reign over, in and through human beings. Cultic and ritual practices in the Old Testament, such as the sacrifices, holy feasts, rituals and the deeper contents of the prophecies depict the relation between the ruling God and his communion with people, which is expressed in various covenants. The idea of a covenant with God and a special covenantal relation between people is determined by the theology of the Old Testament and defines human relations in the political and social spheres. Old Testament revelation is a revelation about God's covenant with his people and the effect of this covenantal relation in the life of his people. Van Genderen and Velema (1993:498) indicate that the idea of a covenant between God and his people commenced with the Covenant with Abraham and continued through the Sinaitic covenant and the renewal of the covenant as preached by many prophets. Although the people of God rejected the covenant with their disobedience and idolatry on various occasions, God again and again renewed the covenant and assured his people of his grace and nearness, and called on them to adhere to the instructions of the covenant regarding their social life. These covenants entail that God makes a promise to his people and then lays certain obligations on them, as in the giving of the law at Sinai and in the covenant at Shechem (Allan 1986:136).

The concept of the covenant is also very prominent in the New Testament as a description of the reign of God, the relation between God and the believers and social relations. The latter is expressed in the so-called house tables (Eph. 5:21–6:9), in which husbands and wives, children and parents and workers and employers are called upon to live in certain relations according to the obligations of the Covenant. The emphasis in the New Testament concept of the covenant is on what God gives, asks and does (Van Genderen & Velema 1993:502). It is a covenant of divine promise and the obligation

on people to accept the promise in faith and express the faith in good deeds, acts of love, obedience to God's instructions and compassionate social relations. The suffering, sacrifice, resurrection and ascension of Christ put the seal on the covenant. It becomes a Christocentric covenant with people accepting Christ as mediator and redeemer. The redeeming act of Christ and people's faith in Him institutes a new community of people, called the people of the covenant or the church (Ridderbos 1971:372). The people of the covenant receive the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12) and can thus also be described as pneumacentric community that can struggle against evil with the armour of God (Eph. 6:10–20) (see the new publication of the Dutch theologian Van de Beek 2014:327). The Spirit of God guides the people of the covenant to adhere to its obligations.

Related to the idea of the covenant in the New Testament is the concept of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus (Mt. 4:43). The Kingdom is all about the reign of God and Christ and the involvement of people in this reign due to their covenantal relation with God in Christ. In his explanation of the theology of the cross, Welker (2012) indicates that it is especially in this regard that the Reformation brought about a revolution. He shows that the events on the cross not only centre on the suffering God, as was variedly argued following the time of Bonhoeffer, but also on the God who redeems and judges. As part of this discussion, he deals with the concepts of sin and atonement. Furthermore, Welker discusses the meaning of the elevated Christ and his divine rule. His point of departure is the offices of Christ – prophet, priest and king, as emphasised by Calvin. The outward form of the reign of Christ corresponds to his offices. The reign of Christ invokes the church and frees up the dynamics of prophetic testimony and the practice of love. It is because of Christ's office of three kinds that theology is not a spiritual matter, but has public meaning. Welker continues to describe the important balance needed between the public and the eschatological Christ. Taking his explanation of the offices of Christ as these are also transferred to believers, one can conclude that the Kingdom is also all about relations and the effect of these relations in the social sphere. The Kingdom thus also set the scene for specific relationships between God and his people and amongst believers. New relationships are also the centre of the doctrine of the covenant.

The first sphere of the covenantal relation within the framework of the Kingdom (reign) of God is the church, which is the world-wide or universal congregation of all believers in Christ. The universal church encompasses the people of the old covenant and the new covenant. In the old covenant, the people of God were saved by their faith in his promise of the new kingdom and the Messiah. This promise, expressed in Psalms, holy acts, holy places, the tradition of kings and the prophecies, was fulfilled in the coming of Christ. In the new covenant, Christ calls people to him. They become the *ekklesia* (called people) and are eventually filled by the spirit of God. The universal church is manifested in local congregations, which bear all the characteristics of the universal church (Grudem 1994:857; Küng 1992:107). The old

ecumenical confessions and the major confessions of the Reformation testify that the church is the holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit (see Beeke & Ferguson 1999:188). The Apostolic creed adds to the confession of faith in the 'holy catholic Church', the belief in the communion of saints (see Leith 1982:25). In addition to this confession, the Larger Westminster Confession of Faith testifies that all believers:

are united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his grace, sufferings, death resurrection and glory, and being united with each other in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as to conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. (Beeke & Ferguson 1999:197)

The covenantal relation between believers and God, and between believers mutually is of special importance in Reformed anthropology and ecclesiology. The covenant denotes a special relation with God and between believers. Believers are reconciled with God and with each other in the body of the church as it is manifested in a certain place like Jerusalem, Antioch, and so on. But the reconciliation affects all other relations of believers in Christ. Enmity turns into love and compassion. Reconciliation must boil down to peace initiatives between people (Langmead 2008:12). Christians are instructed to love their neighbour irrespective of religious or social differences and even their relation with the creation changes from lust for power and exploitation to servanthood and stewardship. Johnson (2005:28) indicates that reconciliation really embodies an ethic. In his view, it 'embodies a theology that is alive, that interacts with the culture around it and responds actively to the things that are happening, especially to the violence that is happening'.

The reconciliation in Christ renews all the relations of the believer in Christ – the relation with God, with fellow-believers, with all people and with creation. Christians who are active in societal spheres such as the state, church, civil society and other structures should be driven by the covenantal relations, which are brought about by the reconciliation in Christ under the supreme reign of God. Christians are doing the work of the Kingdom when they realise and nurture the renewed covenantal relations in all spheres of life. In early modern Calvinism, it was the idea of the covenant that determined the development of constitutionalism, which grew out of what Witte (2007:143) describes as covenant politics. The covenant also determines the relations in family and marriage. Due to the importance of this statement in pursuing the central argument of this study, the rest of the article focuses on the relevance of the doctrine of the covenant for marriage and family.

Marriage and family life

The Protestants resisted the doctrine of marriage as sacrament, but they did not belittle the importance of marriage as a biblical institution. They founded marriage in

the theology of creation and emphasised sexuality as an essential part of marriage, over and against Augustine's plea of virginity and the Roman Catholic doctrine of celibacy (Roberts 2007:132). However, they regarded the purpose of marriage one-sidedly, as procreational only. Luther discussed marriage within his idea of the two kingdoms. Although he did not use the covenant concept, he regarded marriage as one of the orders of creation, as an essential relationship for the well-being of the civil state. He felt that the state should exercise authority over the entering of husbands and wives into the bondage of marriage and over the dissolution of marriage. He took the position that entering into the bond of marriage should require parental permission, witnesses and public profession of the marriage vows (Johnson 2005:129). Marriage should be seen as an essential building block of a healthy state and the Church.

Stackhouse (2005:159) describes how Calvin and others in the Reformed tradition, especially Bullinger and Bucer, followed Luther at first, but gradually developed the theory of overlapping covenants regarding marriage and family. Overlapping covenants entail that God enters into a covenant with the marriage partners and with their families. This covenant forms a bond between the parents of the couple and the couple, and between the larger society and the particular couple, with God present in all these relationships. According to Stackhouse, this is the idea celebrated and made known to all in public worship services whereby various rites acknowledge these creational and covenantal relationships. Marriage thus becomes a network of mutual entrustment.²

Since the Reformation, the concept of marriage as a covenant was developed further and it now finds expression in the formulas used in the liturgies of worship services in which marriage ceremonies are celebrated. Covenantal wedding liturgies developed. Most of these liturgies are still used in Reformed churches today. However, some tension developed within the Protestant traditions. While recognising the rites of all other religious persuasions, Lutherans made marriage more a matter of civil law, while the Reformed and Puritan traditions promoted the church-centred wedding as central, to be then registered by civil authority (Stackhouse 2005:164). But the idea of marriage as a covenant remained the most important definition of marriage. Central in this idea is the vow of both partners to a life-long commitment and a functional differentiation in marital roles and responsibilities.

An important contemporary exponent of the idea of marriage as covenant in the Protestant tradition is Köstenberger, who is regarded as an 'evangelical ethicist' and who has published a thought-provoking book about God, marriage and family.

²Witte (2001:6) describes the rite of marriage in the time of the Reformation as follows: 'Marriage was a covenantal association of the entire community. A variety of parties played a part in the formation of the marriage covenant. The marital couple themselves swore their betrothals and espousals before each other and God – rendering all marriage triparty agreements with God as party, witness, and judge. The couple's parents, as God's bishops and children, gave their consent to the union. Two witnesses, as God's priest to their peers, served as witnesses to the marriage. The minister, holding the spiritual power of the Word, blessed the couple and admonished them in their spiritual duties. The magistrate, holding the temporal power of the sword, registered the parties and their properties and ensured the legality of their union'.

The value of this study is his exegesis of the biblical texts on marriage and related matters. True to the Protestant tradition, he highlights the covenantal and contractual nature of marriage. The concept of marriage as a covenant involves firstly the permanence of marriage. In this respect, he refers to Matt. 19:6 and Mark 10:9 to prove that marriage should be seen as an institution of God that designates a permanent relationship between husband and wife. God is the author of every marriage. He continues to argue that:

Marriage constitutes a serious commitment that should not be entered into lightly or unadvisedly. It involves a solemn promise or pledge, not merely to one's marriage partner but before God. (Köstenberger 2004:89)

Secondly, he reminds us that, due to its covenantal character, marriage should be seen as sacred. Marriage is not merely a human agreement between two consenting individuals, but a relationship before and under God. In this respect, he refers to the creational history in Genesis 2:22. Sacred does not mean sacramental 'because it is not a mystical union under the church's auspices serving as a vehicle for securing or sustaining one's salvation'. Thirdly, the concept of marriage as a covenant refers to the intimacy of marriage. He refers to Genesis 2:23–25 and concludes in this regard that marriage: 'involves "leaving" one's family origin and "cleaving" to one's spouse, which signifies the establishment of a new family unit distinct from the two original families'. The expression 'one flesh' suggests not only sexual intercourse, but 'entails the establishment of a new kinship relationship between two previously unrelated individuals by the most intimate of human bonds' (Köstenberger 2004:90).

Furthermore, he contends that marriage as covenant indicates, fourthly, the mutuality of marriage. It is a relationship of the self-giving of one human being to another as it is explained in the household codes (Eph. 5:25–30). 'The marriage partners are to be first and foremost concerned about the well-being of the other person and to be committed to each other in steadfast love and devotion' (Köstenberger 2004:90). However, he maintains that mutuality does not mean 'sameness in role'. Women should be seen as the 'suitable helpers' of their husbands, while husbands bear the ultimate responsibility for their marriage before God. This point of view is derived from the household codes as explained in Ephesians 5:22–24, Colossians 3:18 and Genesis 2:18, 20. In this respect, Köstenberger follows the early Protestant tradition in its presentation of the subordination of women, a point of view that can be questioned from the premise of marriage as a covenant also. This aspect of marriage in the early Protestant tradition can be regarded as a weak point in its ethic of marriage, an issue revisited later in this article.

Köstenberger (2004:90–91) concludes his description of the covenantal marriage by pointing to the exclusiveness of marriage. He says that covenantal marriage is not only permanent, sacred, intimate, and mutual, but is also exclusive, in his view, according to Genesis 2:22–25 and 1 Corinthians 7:2–5. No other relationship should interfere with the

marriage commitment between husband and wife. All forms of sexual relations outside wedlock should be regarded as illegitimate. He refers to the Song of Solomon to say that only in the secure context of an exclusive marital bond can the free and complete giving of oneself take place in marriage. His conclusion is:

that marriage can best be described as a covenant (or a creation ordinance with covenantal features), a sacred bond between a man and a woman, instituted by and publicly entered before God [*whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple*], normally consummated by sexual intercourse. (Köstenberger 2004:91)

Marriage then is, according to scripture, a sacred bond that is characterised by permanence, sacredness, intimacy, mutuality and exclusiveness.

Thus far, the overview of the Protestant description of marriage is as a covenant. The doctrine of the covenant enriches, to my mind, the idea of marriage and provides a good foundation for the presentation of marriage in today's secularising communities and for the care of marriage and family life in church ministry today. However, in spite of the great value of the view of the covenantal character of marriage in Protestant traditions, marriage as such has in the past and can presently and in future develop into an androcentric and patriarchal institution in which wives are regarded as subordinate to their husbands. This argument is raised by Dreyer and Van Aarde (2007:631) as an objection to the covenant metaphor. They indicate that the scriptural material usually used to defend the model of marriage, as a covenant founded in relation between God and humans, indicates an unequal relation between husband and wife, for the relation between God and humans is unequal. Marriage as a covenant is, in their view, prone to be a patriarchal marriage. This observation of Dreyer and Van Aarde is important and the question can be asked: Should the covenantal model of marriage be abolished? In my view, the model as developed in Protestant traditions can be redefined and presented in such a way that the unacceptable patriarchalism attached to it can be avoided and the precious contents of the model can be maintained and applied in Christian marital ethics and ministry of the church. The following concluding section is an attempt to propose modifications to the traditional covenantal model of marriage to maintain its abundance and depth for ministry today.

Proposed modifications of the idea of marriage as covenant in the Reformed tradition today

Valuable and functional arguments to modify the traditional idea of marriage as a covenant can be found in Barth's marriage ethic, which is discussed in the seminal work of Roberts (2007:139) and also in Sonderegger (2000:258). They explain how Barth defines the covenant in the framework of creation and Christology. Studying the viewpoints of Barth regarding the relation between man and woman, it becomes clear that he chooses as the first focal point in the understanding of this relationship that God created humans in his image and this act constitutes a relationship (Barth

1961:116). Thus, creation has a purpose, and secondly, this purpose is revealed to be a covenantal relation with God and other humans, which becomes a reality because of humankind's creation in the image of God. The creator of the universe is 'this God' and we meet this God in Christ. This self-disclosure of God indicates that God has a loving purpose, which includes mutuality between the Creator and the created. The God who exists in himself as a triune Being-in-relationship creates for the sake of enjoying further relations with his creatures, with those who are not himself.

For Barth, Jesus as the Word of God discloses not only what we know about God and creation, but also what we know about ourselves (Roberts 2007:140–141). Jesus' humanity becomes the standard of our own, and people exist for the sake of relationships with God and their neighbours. This is the basic form of humanity (Barth 1960:285). The creation of humans in the image of God also entails that God desired people who are beings-in-relations. People cannot escape their relations with fellow humans. They can forget and misconstrue it. They can scorn and dishonour it but, 'they cannot slough it off or break free from it' (Barth 1960:285). Humans have no choice to be fellow human or something else. Being human has this basic form (Barth 1960:286). Humanity is one of the determinations that scholars have addressed in theological anthropology.

Within this framework, Barth explains the character and purpose of marriage. Mankind exists in the differentiation and duality of male and female. This differentiation is the only structural differentiation in which people exist:

So-called races of (hu)mankind are only variations of one and the same structure, allowing at any time the practical intermingling of the one with the other and consisting only in fleeting transitions from the one to the other, so that they cannot be fixed and differentiated with any precision but only very approximately, and certainly cannot be compared with the distinct species of the animal kingdom. (Barth 1960:286)

The only structural differentiation in human existence is male and female. However, he warns against any physiological or psychological attempt to describe the distinctiveness of male and female, respectively: 'because real men and real women are far too complex and contradictory to be summed up in portrayals of this nature' (Barth 1960:287). Man speaks against himself if he assesses and treats women as inferior beings. In this respect, Barth deviates from the view of the subordination of women as it was expressed in the Reformed tradition. Barth (1960) says:

it is obvious that the encounter between man and woman is fully and properly achieved only where there is the special connection of one man loving this woman and one woman loving this man in free choice and with a view to a full life-partnership; a connection which is on both sides so clear and strong as to make their marriage both possible and necessary as a unique and definite attachment. (p. 288)

Barth (1960:301) acknowledges that marriage is a covenant that rests on the covenant between Creator and creature. But

in his exposition of the household code in Ephesians 5, he concludes that marriage has nothing to do with the subordination of women because it demands mutual subordination in respect before the Lord in a life of praising the Lord and loving each other. He warns against *androcracy* and criticises Bovet and Brunner who attempted to draw on the subordination of women from a kind of natural theology (see Roberts 2007:146; Sonderegger 2000:267). Marriage should emulate God-in-relation and it is up to husbands and wives to realise this principle. Within this relation, sexual differences or functional differentiation are not the most important aspects. It is up to men and women themselves to create their social roles within the covenantal relation, which is a relation of equals before God (see also Sonderegger 2000:268). What the content of the marital relation should be, what men and women should do as they confront one another and live together, is left up to actual men and women to discover and unfold from what God has given (see Roberts 2007:144):

And in this way the divine command permits man and woman continually and particularly to discover their specific sexual nature, and to be faithful to it in this form which is true before God, without being enslaved to any preconceived opinions. (Barth 1961:153; see also Gollwitzer 1994:194)

Barth thus paves the way for a re-assessment of the androcentric and patriarchal character of the covenantal marriage that was the result of the post-Reformation evaluation of marriage as covenant. The concept of marriage as covenant does not necessarily entail patriarchy and androcentrism, although many of the Reformed ethicists who entertained the idea of marriage as a covenant, support the notion of the subordination of women (see for example Brighton 2005:264). Many marriage formulas in some Reformed traditions still express the latter concept (see Botha & Dreyer 2007).

A biblical theological hermeneutical approach to the understanding of Scripture with emphasis on salvation history or revelation history supports the ideas of Barth. The author has discussed the revelation-historical evidence on the equality of men and women in depth in another publication and will represent a summary of this material, with some alterations here, to further the argument that the concept of marriage as covenant can be accepted and applied in the teachings and ministry of Reformed churches without falling into the androcentrism and patriarchy of most streams in the Reformed traditions (see Vorster 2007: 179–208). The argument proceeds from Barth's idea of creational order. The argument is also founded in the viewpoint of Brueggemann (1997:452), who affirms that being created in the image of God indicates the communal intersexual character of humanhood. The consequence of this point of view is that the equality brought about by the *imago Dei* and the human's dominion over creation, is most important as part of the relation husband and wife. The functional differentiation between them is of secondary concern. God created male and female equally.

Furthermore, inequality between husbands and wives as it was expressed in marriages in the ancient East and throughout history is due to the Fall. The Fall brought about a change in the God-created order. Due to sin, the equality became inequality. Sin distorted the cooperation into subordination of women and her 'sameness' into inferiority. She was regarded as inferior in jurisprudence, as is evident in Exodus 17:20; Deuteronomy 5:11 and Numbers 27:8. She was looked upon as a subordinate in social life (Ex. 21:3; 2 Sm. 11:26; Pr. 12:4; Gn. 18:12 and Jdg. 19:26). The Dutch Old Testament scholar Vriezen (1966:446) draws the conclusion that all forms of patriarchy in Old Israel and in the time of the New Testament resulted from sin and is not the creational order. The wife's relationship of dependency on her husband is punishment for sin. The curse on the female in Gen. 3:16 is not an instruction to the husband to rule over his wife, but a description of the consequence of the Fall. Likewise, is the curse on the male person's labour in Gen. 3:17–19. To manage these consequences of sin, God has forbidden the buying and selling of wives, as was the case in the ancient East. This argument is valid because it proclaims the importance of the *imago Dei* after the fall. God's redeeming and renewing work aims to break through the barriers of patriarchy and restore the creational relationships of mutual dependency and submission to one another (Eph. 5:21).

In addition to the creational order, the idea of the covenant entails that God included men, women and children. His agreement applies to everyone in the household of grace. In this agreement, which constitutes the new relationship between God and the faithful, and between the faithful in their own midst, no discrimination occurs. God does not discriminate. The Covenant was erected with every single person – man, woman and child. In this relationship, there is no superiority or inferiority, everyone is equal as children of Yahweh. Thus, the Covenant became an expression of the equality between the male and the female in the most essential aspect of God's involvement with humankind. The logical consequence of this fact is that believers should treat each other as equals, especially in the church as the place where the agreement of the Covenant should glitter as a sign of God's grace. The Covenant emblematises the equality of God's people within the household of grace, and obliges the faithful to manifest this equality in the fulfilment of the commands of the Covenant in daily life.

God also sets up a sign of the agreement. In the Old Testament dispensation, the practice of circumcision was instructed to serve as an outward sign of the Covenant (Gn. 17:10–12). In the New Testament, the sacrament of baptism became the sign denoting that God made these promises to the believers and their children (Ac. 2:39). When people turned to the faith, they and their children were baptised as a sign of their new relationship with God (Ac. 16:33). This sign signifies the incorporation of people into the covenant and thus the church as a new community. This new community bridges all social barriers such as race, gender, ethnicity and class (Bosch 1991:172). People become 'one in Christ', and their status should then be understood in terms of their baptism and not

in terms of their birth (Breytenbach 1986:21). Baptism as the sign of the covenant also indicates the equality of husband and wife.

The equality is also evident in the biblical teaching of the kingdom of God, the church and the relation between believers and all people, as this teaching is described earlier in the article. In essence, the Kingdom is all about the reign of God and his divine rule over the whole creation. The Old Testament proclaims the reality of this rule, which is realised in various social relations such as marriage and family. The New Testament proclaims the rule of God as it is manifested in the coming of Christ and the formation of the people of God (see Guthrie 1981:419).

Christ as the King and head of the Church confers this stewardship to all believers, men and women. There is no superior and inferior stewardship in the kingdom of God. Both the male and the female believers should administer the authority of Christ in all spheres of life, including the local church. Just as the Covenant employs men and women without discrimination as partners of God, so does the Kingdom when establishing them as stewards, irrespective of persons. As in the case of the concept of the Covenant, no ideology of the superiority of men in church or society can be founded on the biblical teaching of the kingdom of God. In the Kingdom, all stewards are equal and this principle refers to husbands and wives as well.

The redemption in Christ introduces in addition to the doctrine of creation, covenant and kingdom a further principle of biblical anthropology that signifies the intrinsic equality of men and women, which should be manifested in the marital relationship. The concept of redemption teaches the restoration of fallen humankind and thus the restoration of the ability to do the will of God and live as new people in obedience to God's rule. Christ reconciled people with God and with one another. This reconciliation becomes the foundation of all social relations, such as marital relations, family relations and labour relations. The household codes must be understood within the context of redemption and reconciliation. (Eph. 5:21–33; Col. 3:18–19; 1 Pt. 3:1–7). Just as humans are regarded as equal according to the first three principles of biblical teaching mentioned above, they are regarded as equals according to the latter. God reconciled both men and women with Him, irrespective of gender or any other social differences. Galatians 3:28 reads: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (see also Col. 3:11).

Patriarchalism and androcentrism (androcracy), as a vestige of sin and a remnant of the fallen creation, has become null and void because of the reconciliation in Christ. Furthermore, all the other doctrines of superiority and inferiority of people, such as slavery, ethnocentrism and racism, are hereby regarded as contradictory to the reconciliation in Christ. The new creation, with its reconciled people, has a culture of equality. Therefore, Christians as new people in Christ should promote this culture in church and society. Part of this calling

is to reject all forms of patriarchalism and establish gender equality as a sign of the renewed relationships in the people of God. Just like men, women should be free to fulfil their calling as people of the Kingdom in all spheres of ecclesiastical, social and marital life.

Another biblical theme that is crucial to the understanding of the relation of husbands and wives is the pneumatology, and especially the idea of the gifts of the Spirit. For the fulfilment of their calling as stewards in the Kingdom, Christian men and women are bestowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, irrespective of gender. Male and female believers are blessed with the gifts of the message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, the gift of faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy (Ac. 21:9), distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:8–11). Other gifts include the gifts of serving, teaching (admonishing), encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership and showing mercy (Rm. 12:6–8; see also 1 Cor. 13:2; 14:6; Col. 1:28). The believers who receive these gifts are encouraged to utilise them in the edification of the congregation and promote the spiritual growth of one another. Of particular interest is the fact that female believers are also bestowed with the gifts of teaching, prophecy and leadership—gifts of particular value for the ministry of the Word (Merkel 1999:402). These gifts are given to wives, without any form of discrimination or exclusion. The gifts of the Spirit are a clear indication of the equality of husbands and wives and their ability to mutually strengthen their marital relation, their family and their other social relations.

The concepts of the creational order, the covenant, the Kingdom, redemption, reconciliation and the gifts of the Spirit indicate that the relation of husband and wife in biblical terms is a relation of equals before God and should also be regarded as such in social life. Although patriarchalism and androcentrism are described in biblical narratives, they cannot be regarded as biblical instructions for marital life because such a view would contradict the core principles of marriage, as these are expressed in the above-mentioned biblical theological concepts.

Conclusion

The biblical idea of marriage as a covenant is to my mind still a powerful and a solid foundation for Christian marriages in a time when a new ethic of marriage arises due to the postmodern, post-secular and post-ecclesiastical paradigms. The idea of marriage as covenant not only denotes the deep spiritual character of the marital relation, but this idea and everything it entails provides the liberty for men and women to realise their relations according to their own wishes and circumstances as equals and gifted servants of God. This concept, when theologically expounded, runs against patriarchy and androcentrism, and enriches marital relations as permanent relations of mutual trust, stewardship and love on an equal basis. Neither husband nor wife is superior or inferior. The idea of marriage as a covenant provides guidelines for modern-day marriage counselling

and affirms the importance of marriage for the health of society and especially for the church (see Tarwater & Jones 2004:11).

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