

**Capstone Project
Sacrament of Marriage
Community of Christ II
April 24th, 2016**

The Community of Christ celebrates with eight different sacraments. These sacraments are; baptism, confirmation, communion, laying on of hands for the sick, blessing of children, marriage, ordination, and evangelist blessing.¹ For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing on the sacrament of marriage. More precisely, I will be taking a look at the history of Community of Christ's theology around the sacrament of marriage and where it might be inadequate for today's world. By looking at the history and possible reasoning and understanding of marriage in the past, I will then conclude on why or why not the Community of Christ should revise their current view on the sacrament of marriage to be more relevant to today's society within North America, while still reflecting the church's beliefs and values.

My concern for the church's theology of the sacrament of marriage comes from a recent event that happened in the Canada East Mission Center. A young, engaged couple bought a house together, one was currently in the priesthood, the other was not. They did not hide the fact that they were living together before their wedding took place, and so church administration found out about their living arrangements. The couple were told that there was a long standing, unwritten policy, that priesthood should not live together before marriage, as marriage was one of the church's sacraments and they should be abiding to the standards of the church. The individual holding priesthood was given the option to voluntarily hand in their priesthood card. When they rejected this, the church sent him notice that his priesthood had been revoked. This

1. Community of Christ, *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald House Publishing, 2012), 17-18.

caused lot of confusion, hurt and questioning in our mission center as to why this happened and why it was dealt with the way it was.

Definition of a Sacrament:

The Community of Christ views the sacraments as “our covenant with God is expressed in all of life. But it is objectified in momentary experiences of shared commitment. These are the ordinances and sacraments of the church...sacraments are structured experiences of worship. They are in sharp contrast to practices of worship which are passive, or meditative, or ending in themselves.”² By this definition it does not say that marriage has to be a public display in a large ceremony, but rather experiences of shared commitment. That commitment can be reflected in witnessing an ongoing, healthy relationship of two people and the love they share for each other.

Daniel L. Migliore recalls Augustine’s definition of a sacrament. Augustine refers to sacraments as “visible signs of an invisible grace.”³ By this definition, the visible sign of communion would be physically taking the wine and bread and consuming them, while reflecting on your dedication to God and Jesus Christ which would be the invisible grace. But what is the visible sign of a marriage? In the Community of Christ tradition, the visible sign of marriage seems to be the physical act of the marriage ceremony, or in my opinion and from what I have seen from different experiences, that seems to be how the tradition verifies the sacrament of marriage taking place. But should the sacrament of marriage be seen as a one day marriage ceremony, or is it a daily display of a commitment to another individual where love and respect is shared regardless if this commitment was displayed in a public ceremony or not? My concern

2. Alan D. Tyree, ed., *Exploring the Faith*, 1987 ed. (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1987), 217-219.

3. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 280.

would be that too much focus is put on a one day event, and while this day can be important, I do not feel it is as important as the life that a couple enters into when they decide to be dedicated to each other in a loving relationship. In my opinion, a ceremony is not needed to prove this. Going back to Augustine's definition of a sacrament as "visible signs of an invisible grace" then could those signs and grace not be represented and demonstrated by the love two people share for each other in their home, in how they treat and respect each other and how they act towards each other in their everyday life?

A definition of the sacraments is not provided in the Bible, and the number of sacraments different among churches. Marriage is not among the sacraments in many churches. "In the new Testament, the Greek word *mysterion* – literally "mystery," later translated in the Latin as *sacramentum*, or "sacrament" – refers to the presence and purpose of God made known to Jesus Christ, not specifically to baptism, the Lord's Supper, or other rites (Eph. 1:9-10).⁴ Migliore then goes on to say that "sacraments are not so much something done *to* us as something that *we* do...[and]...the purpose of the sacrament is to give people the opportunity to bear public witness to their faith."⁵ By this definition, I think a strong argument here is that the "something that *we* do" in a marriage sacrament is live our daily lives with that individual in a committed, loving manner. A couple can still bear public witness of that commitment to each other by being an example to those around them what a healthy relationship looks like.

The Importance of Scripture:

Another factor that is unique to Community of Christ that plays a very important part of where the church's theology around marriage began, and where it is now, is continuing

4. Migliore, 280.

5. Migliore, 281.

revelation. One of Community of Christ's affirmations on scripture is, "as the church tries to interpret scripture responsibly, it seeks the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that the Spirit would guide his disciples into the truth (John 16:12-15). By the Spirit, the ancient words of scripture can become revelatory, allowing us to grasp what may not have been seen or heard before."⁶ The Community of Christ believes that God is in continuous interaction with us and this is an important concept in the church's theology and why it changes. As we learn more as a church and experience different cultures, we look to God for direction and study the scriptures with the possibility that we may see things in a new light.

The Changing views of Marriage in Community of Christ:

For years after formal organization of the church in 1830, I'm sure there were certain ideas and concepts in regards to marriage, but there was no written policy or guidelines of what the standards of marriage were. However, in 1835 Joseph Smith Jr. and Emma Smith had a strain on their marriage when Joseph confessed and begged for forgiveness for his "transactions" with Fanny Alger. This began to spread rumors rapidly about the possibilities of polygamy.⁷ Nearly from the beginning of the establishment of the church, there were issues around the theology of marriage. I suspect this has a lot to do with why the church is so cautious about rethinking their theology around it, as they do not want to cause issues like there were in our history. Regardless, because of Joseph Smith Jr.'s actions and rumors spreading, section 111 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* was given which outlined the church's stance on marriage. This was not a revelation but was adopted unanimously by the body of the conference in 1835.⁸ "According to the custom

6. Community of Christ, *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 25.

7. Mark A. Scherer, *Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820-1844* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 403.

8. Doctrine and Covenants, Section 111.

of all civilized nations, marriage is regulated by laws and ceremonies: therefore we believe, that all marriages in this church of Christ of Latter Day Saints should be solemnized in a public meeting, or feast, prepared that purpose.”⁹ One of the laws they were referring to is that those two people within the marriage are within a monogamous relationship.¹⁰ This theology was long standing in the church’s history, but in the 1960’s this theology began to be challenged.

F. Henry Edwards wrote a textbook regarding the fundamentals of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) and has a 26 page lesson plan on the expectations and the church’s theology around marriage at that time. The first printing of this book was in 1936. Edwards educates the members of the RLDS on the prerequisites of a true marriage. “The first and most obvious of these is mutual affection. This is indicated in part in the statement of Jesus, ‘What...God hath joined let no man put asunder’ (Matt. 19:6); for it is the very nature of God to join people together in love.”¹¹ With all the changes to the church’s theology on marriage, the fact that God join people together in love never changed.

In the 1960’s, as the church expanded across the world into many different cultures, an complexed issue arose. Apostle Charles D. Neff had been living in India and was baptizing members of the Saora Tribe. However, it was known that the Saora Tribe practiced polygamy.¹² Because of *Doctrine and Covenants* Section 111, this caused much questioning and “a

9. Doctrine and Covenants Section 111:1a-b (RLDS).

10. F. Henry Edwards, *The Edwards Commentary On the Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1986), 397.

11. F. Henry Edwards, *Fundamentals: Enduring Convictions of the Restoration*, 5th ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1951), 262.

12. Mark A. Scherer, *Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2015* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, forthcoming), 374.

theological and Doctrinal crisis confronted the apostle, the leading quorums, and the church.”¹³ Because of the church’s theology on “all are called,” they now needed to review their theology around marriage in other cultures. “The Twelve met on the issue for the first time in March 1967, and they adopted the following policy: Those marriage covenants in the Saora Tribe in India made before conversion should be honored. All those who were baptized should not subsequently enter into any further marriage covenants beyond one wife, according to the pattern which the church accepts.”¹⁴ By 1972, W. Wallace Smith gave a revelation that was accepted into the *Doctrine and Covenants* as section 150. This section changed the theology around marriage. Section 150:10a still clearly states that “monogamy is the basic principle on which Christian married life is built,” but it continues that the church will be accepting of those who practiced marriage in other ways before they began to know the gospel.¹⁵ This addition to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the church’s change in theology, made it possible for the Saora who practiced polygamy before baptism, to become members of the church. From this revelation, the church was acknowledging that it was not right for an individual already living in a polygamous marriage to cast a wife to the side as she may not be able to provide for herself. “The Twelve are also admonished to administer the law with proper regard to the circumstances of those involved.”¹⁶ This is just one example of the church adjusting its theology because of a cultural issue.

Also within section 111 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* it states, “We believe that it is not right to prohibit members of this church from marrying out of the church, if it be their

13. Scherer, *The Era of Worldwide Community*, 375.

14. Scherer, *The Era of Worldwide Community*, 375.

15. Doctrine and Covenants Section 150:10a-11a (RLDS).

16. Edwards, *Commentary*, 541.

determination so to do, but such persons will be considered weak in their faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ The foundation behind this theology was that religion is such a large part of one’s life that if you both have the same fundamental values and ideas, then it will cause less arguments and make for a better marriage.¹⁸ While I understand the concept of this, since the time of 1835 the church’s theology has moved away from being “the one true church” and is accepting of other religions and understand we can learn from them. In 2010 the Community of Christ even joined the National Council of Churches. This section on the *Doctrine of Covenants* is no longer looked at as being “weak in faith” if you marry outside the church. It had changed as society and the culture has changed. This is another example of how the church has changed its theology around marriage because of culture and society.

In section 111:2b of the *Doctrine of Covenants* it says: “You both mutually agree to be each other’s companions, husband and wife, observing the legal rights belonging to this condition.”¹⁹ As the culture in some nations began to change and same sex relationships were beginning to become more accepted, the church still stood by their theology around “marriage is for a man and a woman.” In 1982, the First Presidency even released a church policy reminding people that the church’s stance on marriage was between a man and a woman, priesthood could not perform same sex marriages, and a homosexual could be considered for a priesthood call, as long as they abstained from homosexual activity.²⁰ Yet, society continued to change and become even more accepting of same sex relationships. By 2005, Canada had legalized same sex

17. Doctrine and Covenants Section 111:1d (RLDS).

18. Edwards, *Commentary*, 398.

19. Doctrine and Covenants Section 111:2b (RLDS).

20. Scherer, *The Era of Worldwide Community*, 563.

relationships.²¹ The church knew it was time again to change their theology around marriage. However, this was a very sensitive issue, to the point that people could possibly be killed in some nations that the Community of Christ was established just for discussing this topic, and so National Conferences were held to address this issue. In 2012 both Australia and Canada held National Conferences. In Australia, they voted on “whether priesthood ordination should be open to people who are in long-term, committed, same-sex relationships.”²² In Canada two policy changes were voted on; “that there be a change in policy to allow Community of Christ priesthood to perform the sacrament of marriage for same-gender couples in Canada,” and “that there be a change in policy to allow the sacrament of ordination for individuals in same-gender marriages in Canada.”²³ In both nations, the changes were accepted. In 2013, the USA held a National Conference to address three issues; “extending the sacrament of marriage, where legal, to persons of the same gender; providing a church-recognized way for two persons of the same gender to publicly express their covenant to each other (in places where marriage was not legal); and allowing a priesthood call to be processed according to established procedures regardless of sexual orientation, including a person in a monogamous, committed, same-gender relationship (e.g. legal marriage, civil partnership, covenant relationship.)”²⁴ All three changes were passed by the National USA Conference. All of these nations demonstrated a change in the church’s theology around marriage because of cultural and society changes. They recognized that other

21. “Civil Marriage Act,” Government of Canada, April 07, 2016, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-31.5/page-1.html>.

22. Scherer, *The Era of Worldwide Community*, 566.

23. Scherer, *The Era of Worldwide Community*, 567.

24. Scherer, *The Era of Worldwide Community*, 569.

theology in the church, like “worth of all persons” and “all are called” was where their theology should be based for the church.

Conclusion:

Now, how do we take everything that was mentioned above and consider it all while still keeping in mind the day in age we are currently in. In Diana Bass’s book, *Christianity After Religion*, she raises many worthy points that we must consider when trying to make sense of longstanding traditions that have been held in a church in the past, while trying to understand if they should still be held that way in the future. We must remember that times change and the church has been changing along the way as well. So is it time that the Community of Christ revise their current view on the sacrament of marriage in order to be relevant to today’s society? Bass points out that, “religion morphed from an external set of rules into a vibrant spiritual experience of God.”²⁵ In North America, the way people experience God has changed. Generally, it is no longer a strict, stern religion that people are drawn to where rules of life are wrote out for you that dictate “this is how you should live” type of attitude. While this can still be the case in some religious communities, according to Bass, people are moving away from this type of religious culture. So do two individuals have to stand at an altar to pledge their everlasting love and commitment to each other in order to be viewed as the sacrament of marriage just because that is the way it has always been done in the church? Or can they experience God as they journey through life together in a common-law partnership?

Change can be something that people are against, especially when it comes to religion. Some have this embedded belief that God does not change, so rules or understandings should not change. Or like I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, sometimes when there

25. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, Ny.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 3.

have been issues in our history, people are reluctant to change in order to try and avoid issues the change might bring. However, “religion rarely protects people from change. Perhaps a call to return to older forms of faith may delay change – only, however, in the way that Roman persecutions slowed the spread of Christianity or late medieval inquisitions turned back the advance of Protestantism. History teaches that the ‘faith of our fathers’ may have won some battles, but has lost many wars.”²⁶ Yet, why are some still so against change when history has shown that always sticking to the old ways can be detrimental to the church’s health. Religion is constantly changing as the context changes. The Community of Christ demonstrates this type of change in the *Doctrine and Covenants* with new revelations.

History has clearly shown that as culture and society changes, the church’s theology around marriage has changed. So why was a young, engaged couple living together in a committed, loving relationship such a moral issue for the church that it would cause them to take away priesthood status?

In the country of Canada, a common-law partner is something that is accepted and recognized by law.

Common-law partner

This applies to a person who is not your spouse, with whom you are living in a conjugal relationship, and to whom at least **one** of the following situations applies. He or she:

- a. has been living with you in a conjugal relationship, and this current relationship has lasted at least 12 continuous months;

Note

In this definition, 12 continuous months includes any period you were separated for less than 90 days because of a breakdown in the relationship.

- b. is the parent of your child by birth or adoption; or
- c. has custody and control of your child (or had custody and control immediately before the child turned 19 years of age) and your child is wholly dependent on that person for support.²⁷

26. Bass, 6.

27. “Marital Status,” Government of Canada, January 05, 2016, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/ndvdl/tpcs/ncm-tx/rtrn/cmpltng/prsnl-nf/mrtl-eng.html>.

There are many cultural reasons why a person in Canada would live together in a common-law partnership. Perhaps they can only afford the cost of living by renting or buying a home together. Perhaps they want to save in rental cost so they can afford a home, or save for a wedding. Often in situations with elderly couples, if a spouse dies, they get a deceased spousal tax benefit. If they remarry, they no longer get this tax benefit. So to avoid loss of income, they live in a common-law relationship. In none of these examples, do I see reason, based on the church's theology of marriage, for an individual's priesthood to be revoked because of entering into a common-law partnership. This goes back to the fact that God joins people together in love and this has never changed in the church's theology. By two people living together in a common-law relationship, who are committed and respectful of each other, clearly shows that God joined them in love. So why does it require a marriage ceremony to take place to prove this?

In the 1930's F. Henry Edwards wrote something that strongly suggests that marriage is a life-long sacrament, not a sacrament that is a one day celebration. "In a sacramental sense, marriage involves the whole union of husband and wife, a union beginning before the altar of God and continuing throughout the lifetime of the parties. No marriage can persist which is unblessed by kindly ministers of humor and pleasant concourse, nor will a marriage be truly consummated until suffering and distress have added their somber colors to the pattern of life. But in joy and sorrow, success and failure, marriage is intended to be a sacrament."²⁸ In the early months or years of a relationship a couple may not endure any suffering or distress, so with this theology of what a marriage is, how can just the wedding ceremony be the sacrament if the couple has not endured this life experience together yet? However, if the actual relationship is viewed as the sacrament then Edwards theology makes sense. So when a couple is living common-law together in Canada, a covenant that is viewed as legal and binding in Canada, then

28. Edwards, *Fundamentals*, 262.

how is this not showing the sacrament of commitment in marriage? According to section 150:10a where it says, “monogamy is the basic principle on which Christian married life is built,” this is still being followed in a common-law relationship in Canada. So why is it that the church will not accept this type of relationship and that the church finds it so morally wrong that they would take away ones priesthood because of it? Is it right that the church requires a wedding celebration in order for a couple to prove that they are fulling committed to each other? Based on the theological changes to the view of the marriage sacrament in the church, I would say that in nations where a common-law partnership is viewed as a legal and binding covenant that the church should also view this as a marriage sacrament. The church has clearly adapted its theology on marriage to other cultures, so why has it not adapted to the cultural norm of common-law partnerships?

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