Same-Sex Marriage, the Australian Christian Lobby, and the Politicisation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Introduction

Kevin Rudd’s Claim for Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In October 2006, the then-Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd wrote an article for The Monthly in which he brought Dietrich Bonhoeffer briefly into the Australian public political consciousness. Rudd, who at the time was spruiking his credentials for the prime ministership through various social media and popular television shows like Channel 7’s Sunrise, wrote that Bonhoeffer was ‘without doubt the man I admire most in the history of the twentieth century.’ 1 While Rudd’s own Christian faith was no secret, this was surely a strange and risky identification to make for someone who was seeking the highest office in the land. Instead of singling out any of the Labor Party’s traditional heroes – Gough Whitlam, Ben Chifley, John Curtin – Rudd argued, to an audience for whom Dietrich Bonhoeffer would likely have been at best a shadowy historical figure, that Bonhoeffer himself epitomised a muscular, heroic Christianity. Bonhoeffer, suggested Rudd, embodied a social gospel, underpinning his subversive political action with a deeply personal faith, acting always for the marginalised and against the rampant abuse of power that had characterised the Hitler regime. This, presumably, was the type of leadership Rudd was hoping to emulate, and the personification of the type of nation that Rudd in turn wished to lead. There was also, of course, a none-too-subtle dig at John Howard’s conservative coalition, and the type of nation into which Australia had evidently evolved under the previous decade of Liberal rule.

Rudd’s characterisation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is open to scholarly critique. But historical theology was not Rudd’s concern. Far more importantly, Rudd’s article, and the portrayal of Bonhoeffer within it, represented an attempt to reclaim the boundaries of both Christianity and politics from a trend – most noticeable within the United States, but not alien from Australia’s public discourse – towards assuming that the evangelical Right was coterminous with the conservative political incumbency. In other words, Rudd used his Monthly article about Bonhoeffer to challenge the prevailing view, prevalent after 12 years of right-wing political rule under Prime Minister Howard, that Australia’s much-vaunted Judaeo-Christian heritage necessarily aligned a conservative Christian morality with a conservative politics. Such an easy equation, suggested Rudd, is both dangerous and divisive. It prevents the State from governing without fear or favour, and prevents the Church from speaking truth to power. Bonhoeffer, argued Rudd, illustrates a better option, in which neither Church nor State are compromised by too close an association with the other, and in which God is not harnessed to any particular ideology.

Early on in the article, Rudd quotes approvingly from Jim Wallis’s book God’s Politics that ‘God is not partisan...When either [side of the political spectrum] tries to politicize God, or co-opt religious communities for their political agendas, they make

a terrible mistake..."\(^2\) This is precisely the point that Rudd was seeking to highlight. Any nation is the poorer when on the one hand the State presumes to have divine legitimacy on its side, and on the other hand when the Church believes that it has unfettered access to the corridors of political power. Bonhoefferian ethics, argues Rudd, described a far better alternative, in which the State was understood to be an instrument of God’s rule but not its personification, and the Church was free to accuse and acclaim, according to the demands of the situation.

*Gender Politics, the ACL and the Transformation of Kevin Rudd*

Ironically, however, Rudd’s championing of Bonhoeffer encouraged the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) to believe that Rudd was their champion, too. The ACL, which has argued consistently (if contradictorily) for the right to have a voice *inside* Australian federal politics and not simply on the margins (from where prophetic voices are usually to be heard), was perhaps justified in its belief. In the 2007 election campaign Rudd, together with John Howard, had appeared at the ACL’s ‘Making it Count’ forum, with Rudd wooing conservative religious voters with his pledge not to advance the cause of gay marriage, a cause against which the ACL had and has been one of the most tenacious opponents. During a radio interview on 23 October 2007, Rudd declared that ‘On the institution of marriage itself, our [the ALP’s] view is that it’s between a man and a woman and that’s just been our traditional continuing view.’\(^3\) Rudd’s courting of the evangelical Christian vote continued into his first prime ministership when, on 21 November 2009, he became the first serving Prime Minister to address the ACL’s national conference.

And so it was all the more surprising, to the ACL at least, when in late May 2013 Rudd announced to an always-expectant media that, after much soul-searching and in conversation with a good friend, he had changed his mind on the question of same-sex marriage. Whereas he had previously been, he admitted, at least in his children’s eyes, a ‘reconstructed dinosaur’, and the ‘last of the Mohicans’, on the issue, he had finally been convinced to support marriage equality.\(^4\) This put him squarely on the side of majority Australian opinion, and equally squarely at odds with his Party leader, Julia Gillard, for whom the Marriage Act was fundamentally immutable.

Little more than four months out from a federal election, in which polls had consistently signaled that the Gillard Labor Government would be swept from office in a catastrophic landslide, it was inevitable that reaction to Rudd’s *volta face* would centre on his motivations. According to some, Rudd was once again pot-stirring, hoping to attract public sympathy in a last-ditch (and what was to become an ultimately successful) tilt at a return to the leadership, from which he had been


\(^4\) K. Rudd, ‘Church and State are able to have different positions on same sex marriage’, [http://www.kevinruddmp.com/2013/05/church-and-state-are-able-to-have.html](http://www.kevinruddmp.com/2013/05/church-and-state-are-able-to-have.html) (accessed 31 May 2013).
unceremoniously dumped in June 2010. For others, this was simply Kevin being Kevin, unable to resist the lure of the limelight. As Freddie Trueman used to say of the English cricketer Derek Randall, ‘You just can’t keep him out of the game, can you?’ Other commentators were more charitable, reflecting that, perhaps, Rudd really did have a shift of conscience on the issue.

The ACL’s response, though, was swift, stinging and unequivocal. The ACL believed, and stated, that it had been betrayed by Rudd, as though they had been partners in an irrevocable political deal from which Rudd had now walked away in the pursuit of cheap (or at least rainbow) votes. Moreover, the ACL’s managing director and spokesman, Lyle Shelton, thought it reasonable to argue – in an op-ed piece for the ABC’s Religion and Ethics website – that no less a person than Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself had also been betrayed by Rudd’s change of heart. That Rudd had, in The Monthly article from nearly seven years before, stated his admiration for Bonhoeffer permitted the ACL to claim that this veneration – indeed, the moral consistency of it – was now fair game. That is, Rudd could not on the one hand profess admiration for Bonhoeffer, and on the other hand side with the advocates of same-sex marriage. As far as Shelton and the ACL were concerned, the two were simply irreconcilable.\(^5\)

Shelton seems clearly to have thought that he could identify the reasons for Rudd’s apparent change of heart. It was, so the implication ran, for purposes no more noble than political expediency, at the expense of consistent Christian morality. Given that Rudd’s parliamentary colleagues could not at the time agree on his motivations for changing his mind, it is hard to see how the ACL could have been any more certain. Moreover, quite how the ACL thought it could get inside Bonhoeffer’s head is utterly beyond comprehension. What is clear, though, is that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once again, became an unwitting symbol of theological correctness. Whereas Rudd had himself used Bonhoeffer’s name in the 2007 election campaign to bolster his Christian credentials, the ACL was now, six years later, using it to publicly chastise Rudd for his allegedly anti-Christian convictions.

The purpose of this article is not to defend Kevin Rudd’s change of heart on the question of gay marriage, irrespective of my sympathy towards his decision, nor to explore the reasons that may have led to it. Nor is it the aim here to explore theologically whether Rudd is as guilty of Christian moral heterodoxy as the ACL and others have accused him of being in the wake of his about-face. To do so would be to ask a more thoroughgoing set of theological and ethical questions concerning the scriptural understanding of marriage and homosexuality, and the tradition of ecclesial conservatism. Those questions do indeed need to be asked, but not here. Again, my aim in this article is not to evaluate Rudd’s political career against the Bonhoefferian benchmark that Rudd set for himself in the 2007 Monthly article. Rather, the sole purpose here is simply to ask whether, in seeking to claim Bonhoeffer against Rudd in their protest against same-sex marriage, the Australian Christian Lobby has itself been guilty of interpretive over-reaching. That is, can Bonhoeffer’s theology really be the conservative bulwark against gay marriage that

Shelton wishes it to be, or alternatively, is the Bonhoeffer legacy sufficiently ambiguous as to allow multiple readings on the issue? At stake is less the theological issues themselves, and more the question of legitimate Bonhoeffer hermeneutics.

**Reading the Bonhoeffer Legacy**

Bonhoeffer interpretation has been a vexed matter for decades. In part, this is due to the necessarily fragmentary nature of his theological corpus. So much of it lies unfinished, so many themes remain undeveloped, that it is nigh-on impossible to articulate any definitive meaning to some of Bonhoeffer’s most intriguing concepts. As Karl Barth put it, we are left alone ‘with [Bonhoeffer’s] enigmatic utterances…’ In part, it is also due to his continuing popularity amongst wide and disparate audiences. Andrew Chandler neatly sums up both reasons when he says, rightly, that Bonhoeffer’s legacy has been defined by the ‘cluster of abrupt but mysterious phrases’ which he left to us, and by the ‘tremendous symbolic stature’ he has acquired in and through his death. In his book *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*, American theologian Stephen R. Haynes makes the point that Bonhoeffer, probably more than most other theologians of his own era, has been embraced as the champion of all manner of divergent and often contradictory theological and ecclesial schools. For some, he is the evangelical guardian of conservative order. For others, he stands in the vanguard of liberation theology, or even the ‘death of God’ movement. Other commentators want to claim him as their prophet-of-choice against established Church privilege. He is claimed by both conservative and liberal theologians, and by everyone in between. John Robinson’s harnessing of Bonhoeffer’s name to claim legitimacy for his *Honest to God* experiment in the heady days of 1963, and Eric Metaxas’s 2011 biography of Bonhoeffer for Bible-Belt America, stand as two particularly crude examples. Whichever theological position one wishes to defend, Bonhoeffer can be, and has been, claimed as one’s own.

In the recent heated debates about same-sex marriage and the controversy over Kevin Rudd’s changed opinion, this partisan hermeneutic is precisely what was on show from the ACL and Lyle Shelton. I believe that Shelton confused an *evangelisch* Bonhoeffer with an *evangelical* Bonhoeffer, in order to galvanise conservative Christian fury into a political attack upon Rudd’s credentials. Bonhoeffer was deliberately construed as evangelical, in stark contrast to the position being advocated by the would-be Prime Minister. Bonhoeffer was certainly *evangelisch* –

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insofar as that term in German simply denotes someone from the Protestant (usually Lutheran) side of the ecclesiological fence. But *evangelisch* is decidedly not the same as evangelical, which carries far more of a church-political, not to say hermeneutical, edge to it. Yet according to Shelton, Bonhoeffer would be ‘turning in his grave’ at Rudd’s back-flip on same-sex marriage. Why? Because Shelton wishes to argue along the Metaxas line that the apparently evangelical Bonhoeffer, ‘gave his life for biblical principles’. The underlying implication is that the biblical principles for which Bonhoeffer died were coterminous with the sort of conservative evangelicalism advocated by the ACL, and consequently at irreconcilable odds with Rudd’s ethics, which in themselves represent ‘a capitulation...against every clear Christian principle.’

There are two major problems with Shelton’s claim. First, he propagates an untenable historical revisionism. Bonhoeffer did not die for unambiguous biblical principles, but rather for his willingness to participate in tyrannicide. Bonhoeffer took this decision knowing that it lacked clear scriptural justification, knowing that he would forever be tainted by its guilt, but knowing too that Christian ethical responsibility at times demands the willing shouldering of guilt, rather than the striving for righteous innocence. As he said from his Tegel prison cell at the start of 1943 in his reflective piece ‘After Ten Years’,

> We will not and must not be either outraged critics or opportunists (*weder beleidigte Kritiker oder Opportunisten wollen und dürfen wir sein*), but must take our share of responsibility for the moulding of history in every situation and at every moment, whether we are the victors or the vanquished.

Indeed, he was shunned by the German Evangelical Church for decades after his death precisely because he had taken up the sword against the State. Of course, Bonhoeffer justified his decision to conspire against Hitler on the basis of a deeply considered Christology. But to claim that he died for ‘biblical principles’, as though such principles were both self-evident, and identical to the ACL’s conservative hermeneutic, is historically inaccurate and theologically naive.

More importantly, though, Shelton’s claim that Bonhoeffer would be ‘turning in his grave’ at Kevin Rudd’s decision to support gay marriage assumes that Bonhoeffer’s biblical interpretation would inevitably have led him to side with the ACL on this issue. To make such a claim is both difficult and dangerous. As I hope the rest of this article will show, a survey of Bonhoeffer’s writings on the subject of sex and marriage simply does not allow us to draw Shelton’s conclusion as easily as he does. Moreover, the tenor of Bonhoeffer’s late theology shows that he was, indeed, willing to challenge many of the Church’s most cherished doctrines, and was determined to encourage it to embrace, rather than shy away from, the challenges of modernity. The remainder of this article, then, will explore Bonhoeffer’s writings on the subject

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in an attempt to demonstrate that Shelton has indeed over-reached by seeking to claim Bonhoeffer for the ACL against Rudd.

**Bonhoeffer, Sex and Marriage**

When one explores Bonhoeffer’s writings, it is apparent that he left very little material that touches directly upon our topic. Consequently, very few authors have sought to accurately delineate his views. A small number of scholars have addressed Bonhoeffer’s rather traditional views on gender roles, insofar as he wrote them down\(^1\), but none has tackled in any depth the more vexed issues of gender politics and sexual identity. Though homosexuality was of course not unknown, it is unlikely that gay marriage was much talked about in the polite German society inhabited by the Bonhoeffer family. It certainly did not feature in the theological debates of Bonhoeffer’s day – Germany having somewhat more pressing issues to deal with in the 1930s-40s! – and so it is hardly surprising that we find no direct reference to it in his extant works. In the prison letters from mid-1944, there is his ‘Outline for a Book’, in which he proposes to deal, in a sub-section of the first chapter, with ‘Public morals – as shown by sexual behaviour’.\(^2\) But of course, that book was never written, and so we do not have any precise clues as to how he may have broached the subject. Indeed, while there are four pages in which he summarises the book’s intended content, there is no elucidation at all about what he planned to say in this particular sub-section. Whether or not Bonhoeffer would, in this proposed book, have canvassed the question of homosexuality is a question to which we shall never know the answer.

Frankly, though, Bonhoeffer does not have much to say at all about heterosexual marriage either. In his correspondence with his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, we get glimpses of someone who was keen to marry, and for whom the physical delights of marriage were deeply anticipated.\(^3\) Yet in general, he seems to have found the concept of friendship far more interesting, both theologically and sociologically.\(^4\) Nonetheless, there were times during Bonhoeffer’s career when he did have occasion to touch upon these, or at least related issues, and from which we can gain some illumination on our question.

In the winter semester of 1932-33, Bonhoeffer delivered his first set of lectures at the University of Berlin, under the heading *Schöpfung und Sünde*.\(^5\) This was, he

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\(^{5}\) D. Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall: Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1-3*, DBW 3 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1989). The published title was *Creation and Fall*, as Emanuel Hirsch had, in 1931, previously published a book entitled *Schöpfung und Sünde*. 
explained, intended as a theological exposition of the first three chapters of Genesis. With some inevitability, therefore, he was compelled to address questions of human relationship and sexuality. Yet he was also keen to exegete Genesis in a way that was profoundly different to its typical German treatment, that is, by consciously interpreting the Hebrew Bible as a ‘book of the church’. It is unhappily the case that a Marcionite thread had woven its way into the German liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth century, which had led to the under-estimation of the Old Testament’s canonicity for the Christian church. John de Gruchy has argued that Bonhoeffer was determined to reverse this trend, and that his growing love for the Old Testament issued in his appreciation of the ‘social and political responsibilities of Christians’ as well as in a repudiation of the ‘perverse attitude to human sexuality’ that Marcionite dualism inherently entails.  

This appreciation of the theological ground of relationship and sexuality is evident in these lectures. In the section on Gen.2: 18-25, the creation of Eve, Bonhoeffer makes clear that the interpretive context of marriage is not so much the division of humanity into distinct but complementary genders, but the creaturely need for partnership (Beistand). The aloneness of Adam is not good; indeed, says Bonhoeffer, Adam’s feeling of aloneness is brought about by his ‘anticipation of the other person…’ He needs a partner. Insofar as God is also elsewhere described in the Old Testament as a partner, or helper, to humankind, and yet here this partnership does not stop Adam being alone, this implies that there is a deep creaturely need for any person to have a partner, who is not God.  

But Bonhoeffer proceeds to ask, in what sense is this other, Eve, a partner? At one level, Adam’s aloneness is addressed by Eve being self-evidently ‘of him’, ‘flesh of his flesh’, in a way that the other animals never were. Adam and Eve belong to one another, because they are part of one another, and find togetherness now only by being re-united in their shared origin.  

He now belongs to her, because she belongs to him. They are now no longer without each other; they are one and yet two. And the two becoming one is the real mystery that God has initiated…They have from their origin been one, and only in becoming one do they return to their origin. But this becoming one never means the merging of the two or the abolition of their creatureliness as individuals. It actualizes to the highest possible degree their belonging to each other, which is based precisely on their being different from each other.  

Talk of difference (Verschiedensein) here, and clear references to the act of sex, may lead us to conclude that Bonhoeffer is claiming a moral normativity for heterosexuality. Indeed he may be. But the contextual logic of his exegesis does not

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18 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 96. For the German text, here and in the following notes, see Bonhoeffer, Schöpfung und Fall, 88-95.  
19 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 97-98.
automatically or exclusively mandate this conclusion. Rather, the overarching point of this section of the lectures is to explain the nature of the help that Eve, ‘the other’, provides to Adam. ‘Sexuality in the love of the primal community,’ says Clifford Green, ‘should be a primary expression of being for the other.’ Twenty Thus for Bonhoeffer, the purpose of sexual relationality is to be found in the bearing of one another’s creaturely limit. That is to say, living within the boundary of creatureliness is one thing, but to love the boundedness of that creaturely life is possible only if one is loved by, and in return loves, another bounded, limited creature. To have a partner is to have one who self-knowingly shares the same limitations of creaturehood, and reciprocally helps one bear one’s own knowledge of those limits.

Knowing the other person as God’s creature, simply as the other, the other who stands beside me and constitutes a limit for me, and at the same time knowing that the other person is derived from me...and so loving the other and being loved by the other because the other is a piece of me – all that is for Adam the bodily representation of the limit that should make Adam’s limit easier for Adam to bear.

Ultimately, of course, the recognition of belonging to another is enacted through the expression of sexuality. Here again, while Bonhoeffer’s language suggests immediately one thing, yet it does not close off other options. ‘Sexuality,’ he says, ‘expresses the two complementary sides of the matter.’ Twenty-two But before one rushes to assume that this must imply the complementarity of gendered relations, this is not quite what Bonhoeffer has in view. Rather, the two sides of sexuality (des doppelten Sachverhaltes) are simply these: being an individual (Einzelnerseins), and being one with the other (Einsseins). Twenty-three In this view, sexuality can be parsed as neatly by relational identification as by physiological distinction.

Of course, Bonhoeffer does speak in these passages of men and women, husbands and wives. And indeed, why should he not? They reflect the difference, and unity in partnership, which Bonhoeffer wishes to highlight. The point to be made about this section is not that Bonhoeffer normalizes (or even explicitly speaks of) same-sex relationships. He does not. I have no wish to hermeneutically over-reach myself here. Nonetheless, there is nothing physiologically deterministic in his exegesis of either sexuality or marriage. The differences of which he speaks, and the sexual complementarity to which he refers, are as admissible in his terms of same-sex attraction as of heterosexuality. Why? Because Bonhoeffer’s point in this passage is not at all to sanction an exclusive normativity to only one type of sexual partnership, but rather to explain why it is that any person needs partnering with an equally limited person, in whom can be identified both sameness and difference, in order to live with freedom and love within the boundedness of creaturely limitation.

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21 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 99.
22 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 100.
23 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 100.
A sermon from Bonhoeffer’s London years suggests a similar open-endedness. On 3 May 1934, Bonhoeffer officiated at the wedding of Frank Goetz and Doris Dickens, at the German Reformed St. Paul’s Church in Aldgate. He took as his text Ruth 1:16-17. One could ask the somewhat pointedly rhetorical question why so much use is made in wedding services, even to this day, of a story that unambiguously speaks of the loving bond between two women. Yet even without that rather cheap exegetical shot, Bonhoeffer’s definition of marriage here is illuminating. ‘To be married in a true christian [sic] sense,’ he says, ‘means to be able to pray together.’\(^\text{24}\) That it was a marriage between a man and a woman at which he was officiating when he said this is self-evident and needs no further comment. Yet the fact that it is between a man and a woman is not, for Bonhoeffer, what makes this a marriage. Rather, the ‘great venture of marriage’\(^\text{25}\), as Bonhoeffer calls it, is a journey of faithfulness with one another and with God. Only insofar as ‘thy God is [also] my God’ (Ruth 1:16) can this venture be properly termed a Christian marriage.

To reiterate, the point is not that Bonhoeffer was seeking here consciously to broaden the definition of marriage to suit a wider range of possible unions. The one exception to this is that Bonhoeffer very deliberately campaigned in later years against the Nuremberg Laws ‘for the protection of German blood and honour’, promulgated in September 1935, and which prohibited marriage between Aryans and non-Aryans. Bonhoeffer did so, as he says in a letter to Bethge from 1941, on the basis of ‘the right of free choice of one’s spouse...’\(^\text{26}\) That is, Bonhoeffer was not against redefining the State’s definition of marriage. Moreover, the one circumstance in which he argued for a re-definition was that in which people no longer had the freedom to choose their spouse. But that is not his aim here in this wedding sermon. Rather, the point is simply that his definition of marriage in this context is not so ‘wedded’ to the deterministic notions of gender relations that conservative religion or conservative politics insist upon. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer sees marriage as being grounded in and defined by an entirely different foundation, the gift of Christ, and not by an exclusivist heterosexual normativity.

There are other places, too, especially in his Ethics and later prison writings, where Bonhoeffer addresses our topic. In Ethics, the question arises not as a subject in its own right but in the context of Bonhoeffer’s exploration of the ‘mandates’. This concept, as is now well known, was Bonhoeffer’s re-imagining of the older static idea of ‘orders of creation’ (Schöpfungsordnungen). As Clifford Green has put it, the mandates are not primarily concerned with persons but with ‘the social spheres in which...offices and relationships are embedded.’\(^\text{27}\) In this recasting of orders into mandates, marriage exists for Bonhoeffer as one of four – the other three being work, government and church – which exist together, in the service of the lordship


\(^{25}\) Bonhoeffer, London, 358.

\(^{26}\) D. Bonhoeffer, Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1941, DBWE 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 148.

\(^{27}\) Green, A Theology of Sociality, 323.
of Christ. They exist from creation (even, in fact, with prototypical form in the heavenly world) until the end of time.\(^{28}\)

Marriage thus has its origin in God and is performed in faithful obedience to Him. It is, argues Bonhoeffer, the way through which ‘bodily life is propagated, and human beings are procreated for the glorification and service of Jesus Christ.’ Parents are the representatives of God on earth, as the ‘procreators and educators’ of children.\(^{29}\)

In remarkably strident language, Bonhoeffer states that marriage entails an inherent recognition of ‘the right of life which is to come into being’ (*Anerkennung des Rechtes des werdenden Lebens verbunden*). To be married is to acknowledge that the bearing of children is integral to the union. In the absence of any such acknowledgement, marriage is no longer marriage and becomes no more than a love affair (*Verhältnis*).\(^{30}\) It is important here to note what Bonhoeffer is *not* saying. He does not argue that a marriage *must* produce children in order to be a marriage. Fruitfulness is not as such commanded. ‘Die Fruchtbarkeit dieser Verbindung aber ist nicht ein Befehl…’\(^{31}\) Indeed, Bonhoeffer allows that sexual union has its own dignity and place within marriage *quite apart* from its procreative function.\(^{32}\) Rather, his point is simply that marriage must entail a willingness to bring forth children. He does not, though, specify how this is to be done. That is, that the method by which child-bearing happens could be through adoption or reproductive technologies is not discussed but neither is it precluded. We will return to this point shortly.

There is therefore an evident *biological* aspect to this particular mandate. However, it is striking that Bonhoeffer introduces it in mechanistic and not theological terms. That is to say, that one purpose of marriage is procreation is a function of *biological* and not *theological* necessity. Bonhoeffer does not state that, before God, procreation must take place in a certain way, or in the context of a certain type of couple. As one of the divine mandates, marriage has its own dignity, status and *necessitas*. But nowhere does Bonhoeffer tightly define what marriage actually is. Indeed, as Mark Brocker states in the editorial notes to the English-language edition, ‘Bonhoeffer does not wish here to defend a certain quality of being of marriage, work, government and church’, because he wants to affirm “‘their character as divinely imposed tasks [*Auftrag*], as opposed to determinate forms of being...”\(^{33}\)

Thus the key for Bonhoeffer is what purpose these mandates serve, and how effectively they do so under Christ’s lordship, rather than the form in which they perform that service. While it is simply assumed that the procreative function of marriage will biologically require a man and a woman, there is no theologically ontic necessity to it. One might, in fact, push the argument even further. In treating the


\(^{31}\) Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 208n.8.

\(^{32}\) Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 182.

question of reproduction, primarily in response to debates around sterilization, contraception and abortion. Bonhoeffer argues that reproduction is a personal decision (persönliche Entscheidung) and not simply a species-driven necessity. In consequence, ‘it follows that a person as a person has the right to choose their partner in marriage...’ As a union of two people, marriage must be allowed to be grounded in the free decision (freier Entscheidung) of the individuals concerned – not only in respect of the decision to marry, but importantly also in the decision who to marry.

One can, in the context of this article, therefore validly ask, what difference might it make to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of marriage if the conception and bearing of children was, through reproductive technologies and adoptions, no longer limited to heterosexual parents? Again, there is no extant Bonhoefferian text that answers this question directly. Yet the emphasis on the purposive function of marriage, rather than on any requisite type of marriage, suggests that, if same-sex marriages between freely-chosen partners were able to serve the mandated procreative and educative aims, there would be nothing here in Bonhoeffer’s thought that would a priori exclude their theological possibility. The reality is that, in the decades since Bonhoeffer’s death, reproductive technologies have evolved to the point that there is now no inherent reason why children cannot be born to and raised by same-sex couples. IVF and surrogacies have opened up parental possibilities to couples who previously would have had to remain childless. Bonhoeffer does not address the ethics of these particular situations, as they were not realistic options in his day. Nonetheless, nothing in his treatment of marriage, within the framework of the mandates, theologically precludes the viability of same-sex unions, so long as the productive and educative purposes of marriage can be met.

In turning to the prison letters, we see further evidence that Bonhoeffer’s main concern was what function marriages were performing, rather than the form in which they were functioning. Certainly, in the wedding sermon he writes for his friend Eberhard Bethge in May 1943, he describes marriage in deeply traditional ways. Huntermann goes so far as to say that in this sermon Bonhoeffer sets himself on a ‘collision course’ with both feminists and ‘modern progressive ethicists.' Marriage is, says Bonhoeffer, a ‘link in the chain of generations’; the foundation of a home and the haven for its children. Marriages are guided, established and made indissoluble by God. All of this is consistent with his Ethics. And yet, contra Huntermann, there is nothing here that necessarily prevents a marriage being all these things, even if it is between two people of the same gender. The fact that Bonhoeffer writes of a man and a woman may simply be descriptive of the fact that he is writing a wedding sermon for a particular man (his best friend) and a particular

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34 Bonhoeffer has in view both the Roman Catholic prohibition of contraception, and the National Socialist program of forced sterilizations of those people who were deemed unworthy of bearing children, under the so-called Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses, 14 July 1933 (Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring).

35 Bonhoeffer, Ethik, 200.

36 Huntermann, The Other Bonhoeffer, 251-252. René van Eyden similarly argues for a deep traditionalism in Bonhoeffer’s view of marriage. See van Eyden, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Understanding of Male and Female,’ 203.
woman (his niece), and is not inherently a prescription for all marriages. Indeed, seven months after penning this wedding sermon, he wrote, again to Bethge, ‘what different forms of good marriages there are!’\(^{37}\) Evidently, in spite of its divine dignity, marriage for Bonhoeffer was mutable, at least as to form, if not as to purpose.

**Conclusion**

None of this, of course, adds up to a systematic or comprehensive exploration of Bonhoeffer’s theology of marriage or sexuality. It is not clear that Bonhoeffer even had a systematic doctrine of marriage. What is clear is that he cherished it as a divinely appointed institution, and was determined that it be upheld and honoured. In *Discipleship*, for example, he reiterates Jesus’ sanctification of marriage and underscores both its exclusivity and indissolubility.\(^{38}\) Yet it is equally clear that there is a degree of open-endedness in the way in which Bonhoeffer discusses marriage and sexuality, and very little biological or gendered determinism.

I do not for a second wish to suggest that Bonhoeffer was, in his day, an advocate of same-sex marriage. As I hope that this article has shown, his extant writings do not let us go that far. To make such a claim would be an interpretive leap the likes of which the evidence does not allow. Bonhoeffer was, inevitably, a child of his own age and profoundly influenced by the upper-middle class Germany (the *Bildungsbürgertum*) which he inhabited. When he wrote about marriage, which was not that often, he did often speak in traditional terms. But this can be explained by his context, without assuming an immutable doctrinal dogmatism about the matter. On the contrary, there are sufficient clues in what he does say, about marriage, sexuality and other aspects of Christian ethics, that show him to be at least open to new interpretations of tradition, to suggest that he may well have had the same sort of change of mind that Kevin Rudd apparently had in the early part of 2013. As Edwin Robertson has put it, while Bonhoeffer’s views on sexual morality are obscure and fragmentary, ‘we can be sure that [he] did not intend to repeat the old clichés about declining standards, or to deplore sex before marriage or to denounce homosexuality.’\(^{39}\)

The point is simply that, on this issue as on so many others, it is dangerous, even if tempting, to claim a Bonhoefferian *imprimatur* on those matters about which we feel and believe deeply. In the recent Australian debates on marriage equality, Bonhoeffer’s alleged evangelical conservatism has been inadvisably used by some to score political, and church-political points against others whose views are different. In order to claim Bonhoeffer against Rudd, Lyle Shelton’s harnessing of him to his own, and ACL’s, particular interpretation of Christian orthodoxy on this subject is based on a somewhat more inexact footing than Shelton has appreciated. Sadly, for both the integrity of the debate itself, and Bonhoeffer studies more generally, Bonhoeffer has yet again been used as a legitimising agent to a political argument.

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Insofar as this article is predicated on the question of Bonhoeffer hermeneutics, it seems to me that Hanfried Müller’s commentary from 1961 remains as true today as it was then: ‘We can interpret Bonhoeffer only if we use his heritage as a living heritage.’ For Müller, this means struggling with the same issues, within our own historical circumstances, not in static imitation but towards the same ends; not sliding into ‘a Bonhoeffer orthdoxy’, but taking up his theology and carrying it forward. This, I think, can and should be done on the question of marriage, and the ‘many different forms of good marriage’ that may be possible outside heterosexual normativity. In any event, to claim Bonhoeffer for the conservative evangelical right, as Lyle Shelton has done, fails to read both Bonhoeffer’s history and his theology with sufficient sophistication. More problematically, it turns Bonhoeffer once again into a pawn of political expediency, and does an injustice to the profound legacy his life and wisdom have left us.

40. H. Müller, ‘Concerning the Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in Smith, World Come of Age, 182.