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LIVING TOGETHER AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Living Together and Christian Ethics is the first positive, in-depth study of cohabitation outside marriage from a mainstream Christian theological perspective. The book retrieves the traditions of betrothal from the Bible and church history, and shows how these can transform Christian attitudes to living together before marriage. A crucial distinction is made between prenuptial cohabitation where marriage is intended, and non-nuptial cohabitation where it is avoided. Since betrothal was widely understood as a real beginning of marriage, the book argues for a complete pastoral, theological and liturgical renewal that reclaims the riches of forgotten Christian marital traditions and redeploys them in conveying the good news of the faith to women and men who are not yet married. The book takes issue with theologians who marginalize marriage, and suggests that the recognition of marital values can act as a helpful bridge between Christian teaching and people who are not formally married.

ADRIAN THATCHER is Professor of Applied Theology at the Centre for Theology and Philosophy, College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth. His books include *Truly a Person, Truly God* (1990), *Liberating Sex: A Christian Sexual Theology* (1993), *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach about Sex* (with Elizabeth Stuart, 1997), and *Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (1999). He has also published numerous journal articles and reviews.

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General editor's preface

This book is the twenty-first in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It returns to a crucial issue discussed earlier in the series in Lisa Cahill's well-received *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* – namely, how to understand Christian marriage today in a way that is both sensitive to contemporary changes in sexuality and faithful to Christian theology and tradition. Cahill writes as a modern Catholic, whereas Thatcher writes as a modern Anglican, yet they have much in common in the methods and approaches they use and in the conclusions they reach. Both authors clearly identify with Don Browning's Family, Religion and Culture project at the University of Chicago, and in particular with its central aim to defend faithful marriage in a pluralistic world (not least as the best environment for nurturing children), albeit from a liberal theological perspective.

Adrian Thatcher has already established a reputation for thoughtful writing in this area with his books *Liberating Sex* (1993) and *Marriage after Modernity* (1999). He has also shown in his Christology book *Truly A Person, Truly God* (1990) that he is a creative and innovative theologian. Both of these characteristics are present in the two different levels at which *Living Together and Christian Ethics* can be read.

At the first level this is a well-informed book about marriage and sexuality in the modern world. The first chapter shows that Thatcher has read carefully the most recent empirical information about the changing patterns that are occurring throughout the western world. Increasing cohabitation before or without marriage and the phenomenon of children born in a familial context outside marriage are now widespread. The Family, Religion and

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Culture project has been instrumental in mapping these changing patterns and alerting people to some of their negative consequences. There is now clear evidence that some academics and informed journalists are beginning to take notice. Adrian Thatcher, however, adds to the debate by highlighting crucial consequential differences between prenuptial cohabitation and non-nuptial cohabitation. It is non-nuptial cohabitation that is damaging both for those who cohabit and for any children that they may have. The experience of those who cohabit with the clear intention of getting married later differs little from those who marry without first cohabiting. Thatcher argues that this difference is crucial for Christian ethics, but has been largely ignored by others.

At the second level this is a book which argues specifically for the reintroduction of betrothal within churches. Here Adrian Thatcher offers a scholarly account of the history and later eclipse of betrothal within Christian churches and a sustained argument for its reintroduction today. He believes that this could be an important way of encouraging and sustaining those couples intending to live together as a prelude to a later marriage service. Unlike some others who have discussed this possibility, Thatcher argues that marriage itself is a process and that a liturgically celebrated betrothal could become a significant symbol of the beginning of that process. This twin perspective of championing the reintroduction of betrothal and of seeing betrothal as already part of the process of marriage then gives Thatcher a filter for reviewing critically a wide variety of church reports in this area. As a result the book offers genuinely new insights and admirably fulfils the two key aims of the series – namely to promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

Unsurprisingly there are still questions that remain about Thatcher's radical suggestions about betrothal. As he admits himself, the history of betrothal (with children as young as seven being betrothed) has not always been attractive. It has been strongly associated at times with notions of children as property, of patriarchy and of social control. At other times it was associated with sexual laxity and confusion about marital status. It remains

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to be seen whether it can be reintroduced into churches without being sullied by these earlier associations. Thatcher believes that betrothal would help churches to distinguish more carefully between, say, faithful and committed cohabitation as part of the process of marriage and faithless promiscuity. He makes an important point here. Conservative Christian approaches to sexuality (which predominate in official church reports) tend to condemn *all* non-marital, and especially homosexual, sexual intercourse without distinction. As a result most young people (heterosexual as well as homosexual, and Christian as well as non-Christian) and many divorced older people are simply condemned. But the question remains of whether or not Thatcher's suggestions about betrothal will be able to convince conservative Christians to be more discriminating.

Whatever the answer to this question, Adrian Thatcher has written a thoughtful and clearly argued book on an important issue which I am delighted to welcome to the series.

ROBIN GILL

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