

A review of the Report of The Episcopal Church's Task Force on the Study of Marriage

Introduction

At its meeting in Salt Lake City on June 25-July 3 2015 the General Convention of The Episcopal Church voted to approve two developments that would permit same sex 'marriages' to be solemnized in its churches.

First it voted to introduce a new Canon on marriage which omits all references to husband and wife.

Secondly it authorized for experimental and permissive use a set of liturgical resources entitled 'I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing' which contains material suitable for the blessing of a same-sex marriage. In 2018, the next General Convention will vote again, and a majority of all lay deputies, priests, and bishops must vote again to approve the liturgy. At that point, the TEC Book of Common Prayer would be officially revised and material for same-sex 'marriages' would be fully authorized.

Underlying these two developments was a report from The Episcopal Church's 'Task Force on the Study of Marriage' which was set up by the General Convention in 2012 with the mandate to 'identify and explore biblical, theological, historical, liturgical, and canonical dimensions of marriage.'¹

In responding to this mandate the Task Force decided that the overall question to which it should seek to provide an answer was 'What might The Episcopal Church have to say to today's world as to what makes a marriage Christian and holy?'²

It set up a series of working groups to look at the answer to this question from various perspectives and the result of their deliberations are found in the seven essays which form the bulk of the report.

These seven essays are:

- A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage
- Christian Marriage as Vocation
- A History of Christian Marriage
- Marriage as a Rite of Passage
- The Marriage Canon: History and Critique
- Agents of the State: A Question for Discernment
- Changing Trends and Norms in Marriages

The last five essays look at various aspects of the history of marriage, whether the church should act as an agent of the state in relation to marriage, and the nature of marriage in America today. It is the first two essays that are theologically load bearing in the sense that they set out a theological view of marriage that makes room for marriage to encompass same-sex relationships.

In the remainder of this paper we shall evaluate the arguments put forward in these two essays.

A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage

The first essay introduces its argument by declaring:

¹ Task Force on the Study of Marriage, Report to the 78th General Convention, p.1.

² Ibid p. 3

...many aspects of the nature of marriage have changed considerably, even within the Christian tradition. The one element that has remained stable is the relative gender of the spouses. This is a question that faces the Church in our own time, and one which has to a great extent brought us to this closer examination of what is meant by *marriage*.

The Church and the wider society are facing the question: Is the “male and female” of marriage an essential or yet another variable element in marriage? Is it a permitted variable in a civil context but not a religious one? So much has changed or varied in what constitutes marriage. Is the gender difference the sole unchangeable characteristic that makes a marriage a marriage, regardless of any and all other variations? This paper will seek to provide a framework for thinking about this question, to see if there is a theological rationale for maintaining this element as essential to marriage, or to see it as a characteristic in which grounds for variation can be not only explored, but formalized as well.³

In seeking to develop a Christian understanding of what marriage is the essay focusses on the teaching of St. Paul in Ephesians 5:21-32. What we learn from this passage, it says, is that:

Marriage can indeed give us a glimpse of heaven, when and to the extent that it is modelled upon the heavenly archetype of Christ and his self-giving relationship with the Church, his body on earth. It is not marriage in the abstract or as an institution that ‘signifies’ the relation between Christ and the Church, but more that a particular good marriage, when modelled on the love of Christ for the Church, incarnates the archetype on which all love is based.⁴

This being the case, it says:

...in response to the question, ‘What makes a marriage holy?’ the answer that it ‘signifies ...the mystery of the union between Christ and the Church’ provokes a second question: ‘how do we understand this significance?’ or ‘what are the *signs* of this holiness, this Christian identity?’ For obviously, it is not just any marriage that is holy, any more than just any marriage is Christian.

Just as there are good and bad marriages portrayed in Scripture, there is a qualitative difference between the quickly engaged and quickly ended Hollywood or Las Vegas marriage, and that of a couple who have spent a lifetime together, sharing their lives with each other and with a wider community. So what are the signs that indicate the holiness of a marriage? And in what ways do these signs proclaim that a marriage is Christian?⁵

The answer the essay gives to this question is that, according to the Bible and the vows exchanged by the couple in the marriage liturgy in the 1549 Prayer Book, what distinguishes a holy and Christian marriage is the degree of mutual love shown by the couple involved:

...the primary ‘good’ of marriage, its primary moral and ethical value, lies in the extent to which the couple express the love with which Christ loved his body and the Church, and in how they fulfil the mutual duty to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, and to forsake all others to remain faithful until the end — as an apprehension of the eschaton, a sign of the reign of God rather than the continuation of an earthly realm. The loving context in which

³ *Ibid*, p.14

⁴ *Ibid*, p.19.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.19

and by which marriage enfolds the couple becomes an enacted parable for the community of the Church, as it 'preaches Christ' to a wider world.⁶

The fact that the primary 'good' of marriage lies in pointing towards the world to come means that it has no necessary connection with procreation since procreation is 'necessary in this world to continue the species, but no longer needed in 'the resurrection' (Luke 20:34-36).'⁷

Because what lies at the heart of marriage is mutual love, it follows that:

It is not the respective maleness and femaleness of a couple that make them 'suitable helpers' to each other, but rather the extent to which the couple can in fact serve each other as a "help and comfort in prosperity and adversity" and in 'mutual joy.' As with Adam's initial choice, and God's tolerant waiting on Adam's decision, it is up to each human being to recognize the helper suitable to each.⁸

The essay then goes on to argue that the objection that marriage between two people of the same sex must be wrong because it involves a same-sex sexual relationship fails because it is the quality of the relationship involved rather than the sex of the people concerned that matters:

...it is not in the sex-difference, or in sex itself (whether understood as the sex of the bodies involved or the sexual act) that moral value lies. The traditional teaching of the relationship between sexuality and marriage is that it is the latter that sanctifies the former. Sexual acts outside of marriage — whether adultery or casual sex — are culpable on moral grounds due to the lack of (or violation of) the moral values of commitment, fidelity, mutuality, and exclusivity; so it is not the sexual acts themselves, or the relative genders of the couple who engage in them, that are morally good or bad, but the context and relationship of the actors that make them so.

There is a tension between what tradition has generally deemed to be intrinsically wrong and what many in the Church discern as manifestly good in particular same-sex couples. We discern similar sins and goods in particular heterosexual relationships. In short, sexuality is not in itself the locus of morality.

Rather, the location of the goodness of the metaphorical "tree" lies in its fruit (Matthew 12:33): and 'the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things' (Galatians 5:22-23). Moreover, within the context of marriage, sexual abuse, exploitation, or domination are moral failings; so it is not marriage in itself that leads to holiness, but the faithful and mindful enactment of the loving disciplines, rights, and responsibilities expressed in the marriage vows reflecting the love of Christ for his body, the Church.⁹

The essay acknowledges that the 'biblical and theological framework' for the understanding of marriage which it puts forward 'could be critiqued for selecting and highlighting some elements of the tradition — scriptural, liturgical, and canonical — at the expense of others.'¹⁰ However, it says, 'this is no less true of the prevailing 'traditional' view of marriage, which has emphasized or downplayed different aspects of the wide range of material available, beginning with Jesus himself,

⁶ Ibid, p.27.

⁷ Ibid, p.27.

⁸ Ibid, p.27.

⁹ Ibid, p.29.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.28.

who dismissed an aspect of the Law of Moses, describing it as an allowance not in keeping with the more fundamental nature of marriage.’¹¹

According to the essay:

It is always a challenge to distinguish between elements of the tradition — including those recorded in Scripture — that truly reflect God’s will as opposed to the overlay of human culture and custom. We have tried to elucidate that moral values of love, care, fidelity, and mutuality lie at the core of the meaning of marriage. In doing so, our hope is to provide an authentic framework for reflection on the virtues that can be displayed in all marriages, thereby strengthening all marriages by this testimony.¹²

Christian Marriage as Vocation

The second essay looks at what it means to see marriage as a Christian vocation.

The essay defines a ‘vocation’ as follows:

‘Vocation’ in this paper refers to manners of life opened up for, and ultimately received by, God’s people, both as individuals and as communal members of Christ’s body. It is a way of being in and engaging with the world, of ordering our life in ways that facilitate our participation in the wider purposes for which God created us, redeemed us, and brings us into newness of life.¹³

In looking at marriage as a vocation the essay begins by arguing that marriage is part of the wider Christian calling to love God and neighbour:

First and foremost, marriage is caught up in the larger, more fundamental vocation of love. As Christians we are all called to respond to, to join, and to become agents of the love of God in Jesus Christ. The commandments, as Jesus summarized them, are to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind; and to love one’s neighbors as oneself (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27; see also Romans 13:9).⁷ In the Gospel of John, Christ gives us what he calls “a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” That expression of love for one another marks us as Christ’s disciples (John 13:34-35; 15:12:4).¹⁴

Marriage, it then argues, is a particular form of this wider calling to love:

Our wider vocation to love can find a more particular expression through the love of two spouses for one another. It is a love that draws couples together in shared sexuality, affirming the goodness of our embodiment and desire. It is a love of discovery that delights in a lifetime of adventures lived, challenges faced, insights shared. It is a vocation that rejoices in seeing and being seen and known by spouses who can reveal to one another what, individually, they could never have perceived on their own. “It is not good that ha adam should be alone,” God declares in Genesis 2:18: “I will make him a helper as his partner.”

¹¹ Ibid, p.28.

¹² Ibid, p.28.

¹³ Ibid, p.34,

¹⁴ Ibid, p.34-35.

Spousal love can convey a deep sense of comfort in the ongoing partnership of assembling and maintaining a shared life. It can form the foundation for the birth and raising of children, the nurture of family. Thus, to speak of marriage as a vocation to love is to refer not simply to the affective state of being in love, or of falling in love. More fundamentally, the love in which Christian marriage is grounded is relational and lifelong. Bounded by the vows made in holy matrimony, marriage is a holy vessel in which a couple grows and changes together over the course of a lifetime. Ultimately, in these many and various ways the vocation of Christian marriage continually invites spouses to reveal to one another, and to their wider community, the love of God in Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Having expounded the vocation of marriage in this way the essay then goes on to consider whether this vocation should necessarily be limited to two people of the opposite sex:

Should the basic organization of Christian marriage privilege sexual difference — more specifically, a strictly dual understanding of sexual difference as male and female — over other sorts of human difference? Should marriage work to contain or channel human differences into a basic nuptial binary of male and female?¹⁶

The answer that the essay gives to this question is ‘no.’ This is because the ‘mystery’ (Ephesians 5:32) in which Christians are called to participate through marriage involves a combination of unity and difference that goes beyond the coming together of men and women:

The mystery in which marriage participates, which it images forth or typifies, is of a new humanity, a union that simultaneously upholds and uplifts differences that extend beyond the sexual binary. Indeed, this mystery stretches across the rich and wise variety of creation itself. Read through this lens, marriage reflects in a distinctive manner the new humanity inaugurated by and in Christ. And in this way, once more, marriage evokes our baptism: the vocation of marriage in its own way reflects and activates the new Christic humanity into which we were baptized. We are said to have ‘put on Christ’ in our baptism (Galatians 3:27), an act through which the Genesis-specified binary of ‘male and female,’ as well as that of Jew and Greek, slave and free, is in some sense ‘no longer.’ In ‘The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage,’ Christ is said to have ‘adorned this manner of life by his presence and miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee’ (1979 BCP, 423).

The union of affinity and difference at the heart of marriage might be understood most fruitfully as a mystery at the heart of humanity and, indeed, of creation itself. In marriage, our vocation is not to erase our distinctions, even as we become ‘one flesh.’ Difference is neither eradicated nor ‘overcome’ or transcended, but it is transformed. Our unique humanity is creatively activated, that the couple may be united one with another, becoming a new creation while simultaneously remaining two, distinct. This interplay of difference and unity in Christian marriage need not be limited to male and female, but it can be activated by all manner of human difference.¹⁷

As a result:

...although the vocation of Christian marriage has historically been limited to heterosexual couples, the mystery it illumines arguably need not require this. Marriage’s unambiguous and unambivalent embrace of the full spectrum of human difference, including that of

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.34-35.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp.38-39.

sexual orientation, can enable it to image forth the rich variety of creation more fully than it has been able to in centuries past.¹⁸

Furthermore, on the basis of the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 8:15-17 and 12:2 the essay argues that Christian marriage is primarily generative because it enables people to participate in the Christian vocation of being transformed into the likeness of Christ:

Our lives are to be not static but metamorphic, constantly transformed into the likeness of the One through whom all things were made. Christian marriage becomes generative first and foremost through this context.¹⁹

On the basis that marriage is first and foremost spiritually generative, the essay then goes on to say that there is no necessary link between marriage and parenthood:

Christian marriage forms one important relational context for the transformative generativity that Christians are called to embody. Within the vocation of marriage, 'being fruitful and multiplying' thus can indeed take the form of rearing children born to parents who conceive them through the shared sexuality of their marriage. Further, this common manner of child-bearing and rearing can celebrate the goodness of the biologically creative capacities with which many of us have been gifted. This form of parenthood can take place within marriage, and when it does it can indeed be very good. Yet parenthood need not always unfold in this manner.

Further, just as not all Christians are called to marriage, not all married couples are called to parenthood. To speak of parenting in this way is not to reduce it to 'an optional 'project' for those so inclined or for those guided by social expectations' but rather to identify it as a deeply relational vocation, a way of participating in the ongoing renewal of creation. Those who discern a call to parenthood may not be able to have children, whether for biological, relational, or economic reasons. Ultimately, for those who do raise children within the context of marriage — regardless of whether parents and children are biologically related — parental procreativity is fundamentally adoptive.²⁰

Although the point is not made explicitly in the essay, this understanding of parenthood provides a further argument for saying that marriage does not have to be between a man and a woman. The understanding of the relationship between marriage and parenthood in the quotation given above does not require this to be the case.

Finally, in its conclusion the essay defines the vocation of marriage in a way that is gender neutral, talking about two consenting adults, but not specifying their sex:

The vocation of Christian marriage is catalyzed by a love that unites two consenting adults in a holy bond, a sacred vessel in and through which they may grow throughout the course of their lives. Marriage is finite, temporal, and mortal. It is "until we are parted by death" and no longer. Yet in its characterization of the eternal union of Christ and the Church, marriage carries an eschatological dimension, extending beyond the border of created mortality. It exceeds the borders of individual souls, extending to all of creation, the ultimate renewal in which 'Christ is all in all' (Colossians 3:11). In all of this, marriage serves as a vessel not only of our love, of our union in difference, of discipline and asceticism, of generativity and

¹⁸ Ibid, p.39.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.41.

²⁰ Ibid, p.42,

fruitfulness, but also, ultimately, of our transformation, our re-creation. The vocation of Christian marriage finally serves as a vehicle for engaging our lifelong communal call to abide and grow in the love through which God brought forth creation and will finally draw it homeward into God's own heart.²¹

My cat is a dog – An evaluation of these proposals

There is a well known logical fallacy known as the 'association fallacy' which says that because one thing has some of the qualities associated with another thing it therefore possesses all the qualities of that thing.

An example of this would be the statement 'dogs have four legs, my cat has four legs, therefore my cat is a dog.' The first two parts of this statement are fine. The problem comes with the third part which extrapolates from the fact that cats and dogs have one thing in common to the claim that cats and dogs are identical, thus ignoring the differences between them.

The two essays we have looked at from report of The Episcopal Church's Task Force on Marriage are guilty of the association fallacy. In their case the fallacy goes like this: 'marriage is a loving relationship between two people, a relationship between two people of the same sex can be a loving relationship, therefore a relationship between two people of the same sex can be a marriage.'

As before, the problem comes with the third part of this statement. Marriage is meant to be a loving relationship between two people. Relationships between two people of the same sex can be loving relationships. However, this does not mean that all loving relationships are marriage.

An example of this would be a relationship between a mother and a daughter. This might well be a loving relationship, but it is not a marriage. Another example would be two siblings who lived together all their lives. They might have a loving relationship, but this would not make their relationship a marriage. One could go on multiplying such examples almost indefinitely, but the point is clear. Some more precise definition is needed to distinguish marriage from other forms of loving relationship.

In the Bible marriage is distinguished from other forms of relationship by God's creative acts described in Genesis 1 and 2. These established marriage as an exclusive life long relationship between a man and a woman which provides the proper context for God's command to human beings 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1:28). After the Fall and during the Old Testament period this view of marriage becomes blurred because of the advent of polygamy and the permission given for divorce. However, it is re-asserted by Jesus (Matthew 19:3-9) and it becomes the norm which we find in the New Testament as a whole and in the subsequent history of the Church.

It is this understanding of what marriage is that underlies St. Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5:21-32 on which both essays base their understanding of marriage. What the Apostle teaches in this passage is that marriage between a husband and a wife as instituted by God at creation (he quotes Genesis 2:24 in verse 31) is a relationship which points to the relationship between Christ and his Church and needs to reflect this fact in the way that it is conducted.

By suggesting that a relationship between two people that possesses the characteristics of mutual love outlined by St. Paul in Ephesians 5 constitutes a marriage the essays commit the association fallacy outlined above and misrepresent St Paul's teaching.

²¹ Ibid, p.42.

For St. Paul, both in Ephesians 5 and in the rest of his letters, marriage is never referred to in a way that suggests that he sees it in general terms as involving unity and difference between two individuals regardless of sex. He sees it instead in specific terms as a relationship of unity and difference between a man and a woman. He always talks about husbands and wives, not partner A and partner B. Thus in 1 Corinthians 7:3 we read 'The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the woman to her husband,' in Ephesians 5:25 we read 'Husbands, love your wives,' and in Colossians 3:18 we read 'Wives be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them.'

The claim in the first essay that 'It is not the respective maleness and femaleness of a couple that make them 'suitable helpers' to each other' also misrepresents the teaching of Genesis 2:18-25. These verses do not give room for a parallel form of marriage for those who feel a companion of the same sex is more appropriate. It is not because he delights in her that Eve is the appropriate companion for Adam. Rather, he delights in her because she is the appropriate, God given, complement to him as a male human being. In Genesis it is God who decides who is the appropriate companion for male and female human beings in marriage and his decision is that it is a member of the opposite sex.

The claim in both essays that the potential for procreation, in the sense of actually begetting children, is not a necessary part of marriage also involves a rejection of the creation accounts. The command in Genesis 1:28 to be fruitful and multiply is never revoked in Scripture and marriage is the God given context for fulfilling this command.

The idea that spiritual fruitfulness replaces physical procreation under the new covenant is not found in Scripture and the argument that begetting children is unnecessary because marriage is oriented to the world to come overlooks the fact that the procreative aspect of marriage creates citizens for the world to come. As the homily 'Of the state of Matrimony' in the Second Book of Homilies puts it, marriage is ordained:

...that the Church of God and his kingdom, might by this kind of life be conserved and enlarged, not only in that God giveth children, by his blessing, but also, in that they be brought up by the parents godly, in the knowledge of God's word; that thus the knowledge of God, and true religion, might be delivered by succession, from one to another, that finally, many might enjoy that everlasting mortality.²²

Finally, the essays fail to acknowledge the importance of the creation narratives for sexual ethics. The claim in the first essay that 'the relative genders of the couple who engage in them' are irrelevant to the issue of whether sexual acts are sinful is not supported by Scripture.

As numerous commentators have pointed out, the list of forbidden sexual acts in Leviticus 18 and 20, including the prohibition of homosexual acts, is based on God's creation of human beings as male and female.

Thus in his book on sexuality in the Old Testament the American Old Testament scholar Richard Davidson declares that the rationale for the prohibitions in Leviticus 18, including the prohibition of homosexuality:

²² I Robinson (ed), *The Homilies*, Bishopstone: Brynmill/ Preservation Press, 2006, p.363.

...rests upon the foundational principles of creation order in Genesis 1:27-28: the creation of all humanity in the image of God as 'male and female,' unique and distinct from the rest of God's creation, and the command to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.' These principles describe the order and structure of humanity in two relationships: to God and to society. All the Laws of Leviticus may be understood as violations of these principles. The activities proscribed in Lev 18 and 20 are described as 'abominations' because homosexual practice violates the divine order of gender set forth in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.²³

In similar fashion St Paul's condemnation of homosexual acts as 'contrary to nature' in Romans 1:26-27 is based on the fact that such acts are contrary to the teaching of Genesis about how God created the world.

As Tom Wright puts it in his 'Paul for Everyone' commentary on Romans 1, throughout Romans 1:24-27 St. Paul has in mind Genesis 1-3. He is concerned with how humans have violated 'not simply a 'law' given at some point in human history, but the very structure of the created order itself.' Paul's assumption is that there is such a structure:

Taking Genesis 1 as his starting point, he sees humans as created in God's image and given charge over the non-human creation. Humans are commanded to be fruitful: they are to celebrate, in their male-female complementarity, the abundant life-generating capacity of God's good world. And they are charged with bringing God's order to the world, acting as stewards of the garden and all that is in it. Males and females are very different, and they are designed to work together to make, with God, the music of creation. Something deep within the structure of the world responds to the coming together of like and unlike, something which cannot be reached by the mere joining together of like and like.²⁴

Understanding this point, he says, helps to explain 'the otherwise baffling fact that the very first instance Paul gives of what he sees as the corruption of human life is the practice of homosexual relations.' According to Wright the point that Paul is making:

...is not simply 'we Jews don't approve of this,' or, 'relationships like this are always unequal or exploitative.' His point is, 'this is not what males and females were made for.' Nor is he suggesting that everyone who feels sexually attracted to members of their own sex, or everyone who engages in actual same-sex relations, has got to that point through committing specific acts of idolatry. Nor, again, does he suppose that all those who find themselves in that situation have arrived there by a specific choice to give up heterosexual possibilities. Reading the text like that reflects a modern individualism rather than Paul's larger, all-embracing perspective. Rather, he is talking about the human race as a whole. His point is not that 'there are some exceptionally wicked people out there who do these revolting things' but 'the fact that such clear distortions of the creator's male-plus-female intention occur in the world indicates that the human race as a whole is guilty of a character

²³ Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007, p.155,

²⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone – Romans Part 1*, London: SPCK, 2004, p.21.

twisting idolatry.' He sees the practice of same-sex relations as a sign that the human world in general is out of joint.²⁵

For St. Paul, then, the 'relative genders' of those engaged in sexual activity is therefore exactly the reason why same-sex sexual activity is wrong.

The fundamental mistake that both essays make is to isolate the practice of love between two people as what the first essay calls 'the core of the meaning of marriage' and using this as a basis for saying that marriage does not need to involve two people of the opposite sex. It can only make this move by ignoring the biblical witness that the nature of marriage is laid out for us in the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 and that this means that marriage is about an exclusive and life long relationship of love between a husband and a wife.

Seeing things in this way is not a matter of arbitrarily privileging one element of the biblical witness over the rest. It is instead honouring the whole biblical witness by taking seriously the framework within which the Bible tackles issues to do with marriage and sexual activity.

My cat is not a dog and according to the biblical witness a relationship between two people of the same-sex is not a marriage.

M B Davie 28.7.15

²⁵ Ibid, p.23.