

ESSAY 1: A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage

1. Introduction

One of the charges of the A050 Task Force on the Study of Marriage was to assist the Church and its members in engaging with the complexity of marriage. As Resolution A050 puts it, the Task Force was asked to “develop tools for theological reflection and norms for theological discussion at a local level.”

In this first part of our report, the Task Force offers some starting points for reflection on the theological aspects of marriage. As heirs to the Anglican tradition of rooting theology in the Scripture and in the liturgies of the Church (themselves informed and formed by that Scripture) we begin with a look to how marriage is seen in the light of those rich resources.

A first word on “marriage”

One question that ought to be addressed at the outset, but which may at first appear trivial, is, “What constitutes marriage?” The traditional answer — “Marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman” — is, like many simple answers to complex questions, only partially true. As the historical essay that forms a part of this report shows, there has been a great deal of variation as to what constitutes “marriage” throughout the world, and even within the traditions of Christianity and Judaism, there are variations and discontinuities as to what makes a marriage.

One of the issues facing the Church of the seventh through the twelfth centuries was the difference of opinion on what constituted a marriage. Some theologians, influenced by Germanic traditions as well as by an understanding expressed in the Jewish law that when a man “takes” a woman she becomes his wife, held that it was coitus that constituted the marriage and made it indissoluble. Other theologians, particularly in Italy, rested on a more contractual notion (related to, but differing from, Roman civil law in some details) that it was the consent of the couple that constituted the marriage. The eventual papal ruling settled the debate (for Roman Catholics) by taking a middle ground: consent *makes* the marriage, but consummation *seals* it (Brundage, 331).

As noted, the concept of consent was not particularly *biblical*. Given the power dynamics that favored men over women under Jewish law, women had little control over their marital destiny. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is the biblical law that allows for marriage by rape and purchase (Deuteronomy 22:28-29); but even in demonstrably loving and caring settings, the wife had little control over her husband’s right to a second wife (1 Samuel 1:2). The asymmetry of the boundaries in marriage is perhaps best revealed in the unequal understanding of adultery: a man could commit adultery only by violating another man’s marriage; a woman, only by violating her own (Leviticus 20:10).

A discontinuity settled early in the life of the Church concerned the number of wives a man might have, although the trend toward monogamy had as much to do with ascetical thinking in Greco-Roman and sectarian Jewish circles as with early Christian thought. Monogamy quickly moved from a moral ideal (and under Roman law, a legal limitation) to a practical restriction. (As we will see below, some ascetical moralists in both Jewish and Christian settings felt that monogamy was absolute; even for a widow or widower to remarry was an indication of moral frailty. This thinking may underlie the limitations in the pastoral Epistles concerning marriages of clergy and enrolled widows; 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; 5:9; Titus 1:6.)

An issue that remained far less settled concerned the degree of consanguinity or affinity permitted between the parties to be married. Even within the Torah (and the Rabbinic law that supplements it) there is some inconsistency concerning degrees of relationship within which marriage is prohibited. For example, Leviticus

18:12-14 forbids a man marrying his aunt, but as the law is silent on the subject, an uncle may marry his niece. (This provision is recognized in some civil jurisdictions to this day, as in Rhode Island, which permits marriages allowed under Jewish law; see Code 15.1.1 *et seq.*)

Although the biblical law permits marriage of first cousins (see, for example, Numbers 36:8-13), the medieval Church extended the restrictions and prohibited marriage between parties as distant as the sixth or seventh degree of kinship. Considerable inconsistencies in definitions of what constitutes incest remain between some civil jurisdictions: many U.S. states prohibit first-cousin marriage, although in some states (Arizona, Indiana, Illinois, Utah, Wisconsin), exceptions are granted in cases of infertility or advanced age; in other states, first cousins may marry without hindrance.

Perhaps the most striking change involved the Church's prohibition of a biblical mandate: the Levirate law outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, by which a man was to marry his brother's childless widow. The Church reckoned that this was incest, privileging the prohibition in Leviticus 18:16, even though the regulation in Deuteronomy is laid out as an exceptional circumstance. (This legal tangle strikes close to home for Anglicans, since this formed part of the basis for Henry VIII's marriage, and its later annulment, to Catherine of Aragon.)

Finally, whether marriage is by nature lifelong or capable of dissolution receives a mixed witness in Scripture. The Torah provides for divorce for any cause (Deuteronomy 24:1), while Jesus limits the cause to adultery (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-10); Paul further complicates the matter by introducing the idea that when one of a married non-Christian couple is baptized, the other has the right to divorce (1 Corinthians 7:12-13). This teaching stands in tension with Jesus' teaching that the bond of marriage is ordered in creation, rather than in Christendom. Down through the Christian centuries, the grounds for divorce expanded and contracted in both civil and canon law, to the point at which the "lifelong" character of marriage is so by "intent."

So it is that a part of the reflection with which the Church is called to engage concerns the range of possible relationships that constitute *marriage*. As the preceding paragraphs have indicated, 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.

A second word on "theology"

However, before going further, it is also important at the outset to be clear about what is meant by "theology" — and what sort of theology we are addressing. Marriage is not a subject of dogmatic theology, but of moral or pastoral theology. This means that there is no core dogmatic doctrine concerning marriage, although there is a long history of regulation concerning who may (or can) marry whom, when and where, and under what circumstances; and considerable reflection on the morals and goods of marriage. There is also a rich banquet of biblical and traditional symbolism surrounding marriage — as there is surrounding banquets themselves — a fact which serves to demonstrate how human activities, particularly activities that foster community, illuminate and are illuminated by theological reflection.

Apart from these symbolic applications — some of them embodied in the liturgies of marriage — the Church did not engage in much strictly doctrinal thinking on the topic for centuries, until the later debates concerning the nature and number of the sacraments. Prior to the time of those debates, the Church engaged (as noted above) in considerable discussion about legal and moral issues, such as the marriage of a Christian with a nonbeliever, and remarriage after divorce or in widowhood, but there was no dogmatic reflection on marriage itself; it was marriage *discipline* that occupied the attention of the Church.

The scope of doctrinal or dogmatic theology, particularly as formed in the Anglican tradition, is limited. Doctrine (“believed as an article of the Faith”) is constrained by that which can be proved by Scripture (Article VI of the Articles of Religion, BCP, 868). This way of looking at doctrine affirms *sufficiency* rather than *detailed elaboration* and is focused on, but not confined by, the Creeds (in particular the Nicene Creed, which is described as a “*sufficient* statement of the Christian Faith” in the Lambeth Quadrilateral).

As with the understanding of “the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation” (Article VI), the concept is that not every theological issue need be addressed in detail, and that a set of basic guiding principles can set the ground rules within which the Church has authority to act. The Creeds, of course, say nothing of matrimony; moreover, the classical Anglican catechisms are also silent on it, while the 1979 BCP catechism gives only a brief description of it on page 861.

The Articles of Religion decline to name matrimony a sacrament (as it “lacks any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God”), and classify it as an estate allowed (Article XXV), while holding it to be available to clergy (as to all Christians) as they judge it to be conducive to a moral life (Article XXXII). Given the relatively sparse attention given to marriage, the principal doctrinal formularies of the early Church and later Anglicanism, we are left with what the Scripture and the liturgies of the Church tell us about it.

When we look to those sources, what we find, in addition to the occasional symbolic application of marriage, is a narrative encompassing several different forms of marriage, along with a record of changing rules and laws, rites, and ceremonies — all of which, as the Articles of Religion (XX, XXXIV) also remind us, are subject to amendment by the Church, as questions of discipline rather than of doctrine. It is not so much a matter of the Christian faith as it is of living a *Christian life*.

As noted above, and as reference to the historical paper that forms a part of this report demonstrates, the discipline of marriage has changed considerably through the centuries both in biblical times and after the biblical canon closed. Examples of amendment already cited include Jesus’ own teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, setting aside a permissive statute in the Law of Moses (Matthew 5 and 19), and the Church’s later prohibition of a biblical mandate (the Levirate Law expounded in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, but recorded as being in force as early as Genesis 38:8 as well as being foundational in Jesus’ family tree in the story of Ruth).

In keeping with all of the foregoing, the theological approach taken here is not dogmatic but pastoral, and it will focus on the moral issues raised by marriage. It will serve to provide a basis for consideration by the Church the primary question that has shaped our work as a task force: “What might our Church want to say to the world today about what it is that makes a marriage holy and particularly Christian?”

2. A Theological Arc

The question raised by marriage

Any discussion of Christian marriage is helpfully guided by asking the question, “What makes a marriage Christian?” What is it about this nearly universal human phenomenon, which exists in many forms and in many cultures and contexts, to which the Church feels confident in pointing as a sign of God’s action in the world?

Up until relatively recently in church history, the answer to the question of “What makes a marriage Christian?” was relatively simple. In the apostolic period, attested by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 (the longest and most detailed reflection on marriage in Scripture), marriage was a social institution regarded with toleration rather than encouragement, and for which no liturgical ceremony was prescribed. A marriage was considered Christian if it took place between two baptized persons. A pagan couple, one of whom became baptized, was allowed to end the marriage if the pagan member did not wish to remain (vv. 12-15).

One who was already baptized was not to marry a nonbeliever; Paul alludes to this discipline in verse 39, and it became a matter of church law fairly quickly, and remained so for centuries with varying degrees of enforcement or toleration, from excommunication or capital punishment in the early fourth century (Watkins, 495-96), to dispensation under current Roman Catholic regulations (see the current Code of Canon Law at 1086.2).

The understanding became (and remains) that the bond and covenant of marriage is enacted by the couple themselves, and the function of the Church is to solemnize the event with a degree of formality, with the three aspects of *testimony*, *blessing*, and *recording*. The Church took on the civil responsibilities (and is still permitted so to do in many places, though not all) of ensuring that the marriage is attested by witnesses and recorded, and added its own function of imparting a blessing.

Since the ministers of the rite are the couple themselves, the tradition in place since the apostolic era required that they both be baptized. This requirement came to be seen as less than absolute, and dispensations became available in the Roman Catholic tradition as early as 1669 (Watkins, 575).

In 1946 The Episcopal Church went a step further, when the canons were amended to permit marriage when one of the parties was not baptized. There was strong objection to the introduction of this change, given the intensity of early and historic church opposition to such marriages. It brought into question the meaning of another part of the marriage canon that described marriage as being “entered into within the community of faith.”

As many, if not most, marriages are not necessarily parish functions but involve the friends and family of the couple — many of whom may also not necessarily be baptized — this clause appears to be aspirational rather than absolute (see White and Dykman, 414). In short, the old, easy definition of what made a marriage Christian came to be no longer applicable in all cases.

An icon for the Church or of the Church

The traditional answer to the question of *holiness* in marriage, however, lies in the prologue to the marriage rite as it has come down to us, through many modifications, simplifications, and elaborations, but which, in its present form in The Episcopal Church, states that marriage “signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church” (BCP, 423).

This role of *signification* has been a part of Anglican marriage liturgies since 1549. It rests on a much older principle with roots in the Hebrew Scripture, which analogized the love of spouses with the love of the Lord for the Chosen People. However, it is important to note that the biblical analogy is used for faithful as well as unfaithful relationships, recognizing that marriage in itself is morally neutral and can be good or bad to the extent the spouses are faithful to each other.

For example, from the negative side, Jeremiah 3, Ezekiel 16 and 23, and Hosea 2 and 3 present us with imagery of the Lord as the loving husband of an unfaithful spouse (or spouses, as in Jeremiah and Ezekiel the Lord is married to the two sisters, Israel and Judah). Jeremiah 3:6-8 presents this image:

Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there?⁷ And I thought, "After she has done all this she will return to me"; but she did not return, and her false sister Judah saw it.⁸ She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.

Ezekiel 16:7-21 portrays a vivid image of a loving and indulgent husband betrayed by his unfaithful spouse. (Note the resonance between verse 9 and the imagery of Ephesians 5:25-27).

You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.⁸ I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine.⁹ Then I bathed you with water and washed off the blood from you, and anointed you with oil ...¹³ ... You grew exceedingly beautiful, fit to be a queen.¹⁴ Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of my splendor that I had bestowed on you, says the Lord GOD.¹⁵ But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer-by ...²⁰ You took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. As if your whorings were not enough!²¹ You slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering to them.

Ezekiel 23:2-18 follows Jeremiah in portraying the Lord as the husband of two unfaithful sisters:

Mortal, there were two women, the daughters of one mother; ...⁴ Oholah was the name of the elder and Oholibah the name of her sister. They became mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.⁵ Oholah played the whore while she was mine; she lusted after her lovers the Assyrians ...⁹ Therefore I delivered her into the hands of her lovers, into the hands of the Assyrians, for whom she lusted.¹⁰ These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and they killed her with the sword. Judgment was executed upon her, and she became a byword among women.¹¹ Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet she was more corrupt than she in her lusting and in her whorings, which were worse than those of her sister ...¹⁸ When she carried on her whorings so openly and flaunted her nakedness, I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned from her sister.

As a final example, Hosea 2:2-19 lays out the prophetic figure of infidelity representing apostasy and idolatry, but with a hope of eventual redemption and the beginnings of a transformation of the husband from "Lord" to "spouse." This is also carried forward in Ephesians, where the husband is called to love his wife not as "Lord-over" but as "servant-of."

Plead with your mother, plead — for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband — that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts, ...¹⁵ ... I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.¹⁶ On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Baal."¹⁷ ...¹⁹ And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.

In the context of prophetic metaphor of the relation between God and the Chosen People, marriage can be portrayed as good or bad. This reflects the human reality that while marriage may be good or holy in and of itself as an institution, a particular marriage can be, and of right ought to be, a vehicle for holy living, for which the only guarantors are the couple themselves, aided by God and the community of support in which their marriage is set. Turning from the negative imagery of the prophetic writers, many Christian authors

through the years drew on the happier imagery, such as that in the Song of Songs, in an allegorical light, applied to the Church as the people of God.

However, the ultimate touchstone for Christian reflection on holy marriage is the passage from Ephesians (5:28-32) in which the author attempts to express how it is that the many become one in Christ. He draws on the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and poets and uses marriage as an analogy to this “mystery” of the Church — not, contrary to the language of the prologue to the marriage liturgy, primarily for symbolic value (“marriage tells us something about Christ and the Church”) but as a teaching example (“married couples should be one in love, just as Christ in loving the Church is one with it”). The issue is not, “if you want to know something about Christ and the Church, look to marriage,” but “if you want to know how to make your marriage holy, look to Christ.” Here is the actual text, including a portion of a verse that appears only in some manuscripts:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.²⁹ For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,³⁰ because we are members of his body [of his flesh and of his bones].³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”³² This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:25-32, with bracketed text from the notes; also note that the Greek of the final clause is perhaps more simply stated as, “but I speak of Christ and of the church.”)

This passage and its larger context of instruction to households have become problematical in an era in which the equality of the sexes is with few exceptions either unchallenged or championed. The author writes from and to a context in which the secondary status of women was accepted as the norm. However, even within that context, the author — identified as “Paul” in keeping with the tradition, while noting the lack of consensus on the authorship of this epistle — is attempting to shift toward a more equal understanding in the relation of the sexes.

Note, for example, the paschal notion of the man giving himself for the woman (rather than the more conventional call for the woman to surrender to the man) in 5:25. This is less revolutionary than the statement in the undoubtedly Pauline 1 Corinthians 7:4, in which mutual authority is explicitly laid out, each spouse holding “authority” over the body of the other. (Perhaps Ephesians 5 reveals some authentic Pauline liberation showing through the gloss of later applications of household codes.)

Still, the language of male headship is part of the text before us, and, as unpalatable as it is for most of the present generation, it cannot be denied. What is significant is that the role of the head over the body is directed not to domination, but to care, redemption, and self-giving — a kind of kenotic lordship that agrees well with the broader understanding of Christ as head of the Church, who gave his life for it. This destabilizes the traditional notion of male superiority and female submission, much as Jesus himself, as “master,” inverted the normative role assigned to him by taking the role of a servant on the night before he suffered, and called on the disciples to engage in just this reciprocal ministry of mutual submission (John 13:13-15).

So the tradition of reading this passage as laying out marriage as an allegory or signifier for Christ and the Church is likely missing a crucial part of Paul’s intent, explored at length in this report’s essay, “Christian Marriage as Vocation.” Paul’s reflects on a far greater mystery: the mystery described earlier in the epistle, the eschatological “mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9-10).

It is in this Church (the “assembly” that by its very nature unifies the plural) that Jew and Gentile are made one out of two through the flesh and blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13-14, 21-22). This is crucial in the sense both of *important* and *paschal* — the cross underscores the Pauline teaching that it is in, with, and through Christ, and him crucified, that God’s mystery of union is made plain. Paul places his household instructions within this larger context: husbands are to model their relationship with their spouses on the love of Christ for the Church; it is not that earthly marriages are mere symbols of the heavenly union, but that the heavenly union is the model which earthly marriages should emulate in order to be holy.

By employing this rhetoric, Paul reaches back long before the Incarnation and the Song of Songs, to the primal story of the first spouses described in Genesis 2. Just as Adam recognizes “himself” in Eve — “of his flesh and of his bones” — so too the Church shares a corporeal identity with Christ. Christ loves the church, his body — and the language of both Baptism and Eucharist (in both Word and Sacrament) is echoed in Ephesians: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word” and Christ “nourishes and tenderly cares for” this body (5:25-26, 29).

Paul builds on his image of the Church as both Bride of Christ and Body of Christ, in his own way creating a bridge between the imagery of Genesis and Revelation. Marriage can indeed give us a glimpse of heaven, when and to the extent that it is modeled 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 modeled on the love of Christ for the Church, incarnates the archetype on which all love is based.

So 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?

Returning once more to Ephesians for guidance, note the verse that comes as an introduction to the chapter addressing marriage: “Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” This verse perhaps suffers from being too often heard as an offertory sentence, familiarity blunting the force of the call to paschal, loving self-offering that lies at the heart of the Christian vocation, following the kenotic path laid out by Christ himself.

It might be helpful to look at similar language from the Gospel of John, in the long reflection on the nature of the love of God and the mystery of Christ’s union in and with the Church. Jesus expounds on this at the Last Supper: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:12-13); “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (17:23).

As noted in the paper, “Christian Marriage as Vocation,” this quality of union through loving and mutual self-offering is central to the vocation of marriage, recognized as a particular call within the universal call for Christians to love one another, and in terms of Ephesians, with Christ and his gift of himself as the template or model for the self-giving of spouses in marriage. For in marriage, the spouses literally “take” each other and “give” each other, reciprocally, exclusively, unreservedly, wholly, and unconditionally: as the declaration

of consent and the vows so eloquently state: to “love ... honor ... comfort ... and keep ... forsaking all others ... to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death” (BCP, 424, 427).

The reciprocal nature of the vows — the commitment of each spouse to do for the other as they would be done by — reflects the Golden Rule as well as the transformative “giving” of Jesus for the Church, elaborated in Ephesians and signified in the Maundy foot washing, and most starkly in the painful glory of the cross.

As spouses love each other “as Christ did the church” they incarnate the values of “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God” (D039-2000). As they live out this love, the wider community of the faithful, and those beyond it, will be able to see “a sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair” and “that all married persons ... may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed” (BCP, 429-30).

Marriage, as an icon for and of the Church, reaffirms that we do not live for ourselves alone, or die for ourselves alone (Romans 14:7) — nor do we marry for ourselves alone, but as a sign and emulation of God’s grace and to God’s glory. The love of God for the world in the loving self-offering of Christ Jesus thus becomes a guiding and effective pattern in discerning how a marriage proclaims that it is a Christian marriage, an evangelical sign of that “wonderful and sacred mystery” that is Christ’s body, the Church.

The relationship of marriage to that larger body is emphasized in the liturgy through the requirement that marriage take place within at least a minimal assembly. As the BCP rubric notes, “marriage is a solemn and *public* covenant” and there must be “at least two witnesses” (422). Couples do not make their vows privately, but before God, friends, family, and (ideally) God’s community, the Church. The marriage is a union celebrated and blessed on behalf of the Church in the midst of this community that is, ideally, itself “one in Christ.”

As marriage is an incarnational sign of Christ’s love for the Church, so it is also an expression and sign of Christian community: our life together in and as the Body of Christ. The old patristic tag (said of the Eucharist) “become what you behold” is a powerful reminder of the way in which a marriage both draws upon the love of God and the community and fosters it. So a marriage not only is blessed by the Church, but is a source of blessing for the Church.

And this blessing does not stop at the end of the rite. The community witnesses to the couple by their presence at the marriage service and throughout their marriage journey in their support of the couple. The couple, in turn, witnesses to the community by how they live their lives together — showing Christ’s love to each other, the community, and the world. If marriage is a sacrament — and that has been a topic of considerable debate — it is certainly sacramental in this: it can both express and evoke in others the graces of loving, self-giving charity inherent in the vows.

Although marriage does not have “a like nature of Sacraments with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper” because it lacks “any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God” (BCP, 872), the real grace of marriage lies not in the wedding ceremony, but in the life of the couple: as with the baptismal life, and the life of the eucharistic community that is the Church, it is in the living of the vows, the putting into practice of the promises and commitments, that grace is revealed and shared.

3. The Ethics of Marriage

As noted, the *exemplary* function of marriage — as a sign and echo of Christ’s self-giving love for the Church, conceived in Ephesians both as his body and spouse — is a particular vocation within the larger Christian

calling. As a Christian vocation, the *moral* significance of a marriage will be expressed by how the spouses treat each other, how they incarnate and live out the Rule of Married Life, the disciplines and responsibilities of that life, and its joys and rewards.

In some discussions of morality, the locus of concern can lie in the acts more than the actors. In marriage these two aspects of morality — acts and actors — merge in the spouses themselves, who become spouses through the marriage. The reality of being a spouse is not ontological, but performative and relational. So the efficacy of the *sign* will depend on the degree to which the spouses express and live out the values intended in the vows, which constitute the substance of the marital commitment.

As the essay, “Christian Marriage as Vocation” also underscores, a marriage is a way of life, a discipline, and a discipleship within the larger community of Christian disciples who make up the Church. In this sense, it is a living out of the Gospel value of love, an evangelical witness that “preaches Christ.”

To echo the language of John (1 John 4:20), those who do not love their spouse, whom they have seen, cannot claim to love God, whom they have not seen. And it is in how their love is expressed to one another that others can see the love of God. The spouse is the closest and most intimate *neighbor* for the enactment of the Golden Rule. The theological virtue of charity truly does begin at home.

In this light, it is helpful to examine the ethics of marriage through a principle elucidated by the eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher and ethicist, Immanuel Kant. He held that people should treat each other as ends in themselves rather than as means to some other end, valued in and for themselves rather than for their utility or productivity.

This relational notion is fully consonant with the Baptismal Covenant’s call to respect the dignity of every human being, and with the understanding of each human being as a living image of God. This ethical notion has particular application to marriage conceived as a mutual covenant of two persons rather than merely as a contract between two parties for the performance of services.

The reality of marriage lies in the couple themselves, and in their mutual self-giving as it reflects and embodies the love of Christ for the Church, in that each spouse lives and strives for the good of the other. This transforms and redirects the innate trend toward self-interest that lies at the core of Original Sin, toward recovery of the Original Blessing intended by God for human flourishing, as a response to the “not good” of isolation being rectified by the discovery of the “one like himself” (Tobit 8:6).

It would be helpful at this point to be reminded of three things about self-giving:

First, the gift of oneself to and for another is not to be confused with a kind of paradoxical “selflessness.” To give a self that has been reduced to a nonentity is to give nothing. Moreover, the concept of “selflessness” represents a devaluation of the “dignity of every human being” (BCP, 305). Every person is precious, and to give oneself is to offer a supremely valuable gift, only worthy to be given for the sake of another, a gift for which “the whole world” would be inadequate recompense (Matthew 16:26).

It is also a sad fact that “selflessness” has often been promoted as a particular call for women; the stereotype of the dominant husband with a “selfless” wife has even in some situations been held up as an ideal. In addition to fostering a false notion of selfhood, this represents an inversion of the imagery advanced in Ephesians 5, in which the *husband* is called to model Christ’s sacrificial self-giving for the sake of the Church.

Second, while the ultimate paradigm in Christ’s self-giving — as the highest love shown in giving up one’s life for others (John 15:13) — is both costly and painful, it is also the cause of joy. The Paschal Mystery

encompasses this marvelous interchange in which “the cross he bore” is “life and health” to humanity, “though pain and death to him” (Hymnal 1982, 483).

Third, each Christian participates in this Paschal Mystery, and further is called to take up his or her own cross to follow the Lord in this path of self-giving. It is a universal call, but it is given a particular form in marriage, in which the couple give themselves to each other, giving and receiving to and from each other in a paschal and a joyful exchange, incarnating the Original Blessing as they celebrate the costly paschal vanquishing of Sin.

This movement from sin to blessing is reflected in the wedding that provides a setting for the first *sign* by which Jesus reveals his glory (John 2:11). Jesus transforms water provided for ritual purification into an abundance of wine for celebration — not merely a movement, but a metamorphosis, from a reminder of ritual uncleanness requiring repeated purification to a celebration that reveals and anticipates the fulfillment and completion of God’s promises in Christ.

This action adorns marriage not merely as a recapitulation of creation, but as a part of the “new creation” — the water of creation not simply replaced or supplemented, but transformed into the new wine of the messianic banquet (Brown, 97-111) This banquet is figured in Revelation in the wedding of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem. Thus a sort of grand rainbow arc proclaims God’s goodness from Genesis to Revelation, and links beginnings and endings, hope and fulfillment.

At the same time, Scripture itself offers little insight into marriage as it is lived out — witness the relatively small part that monogamous married couples play in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the early life of the Church, which leads to the relative shortage of suitable biblical texts available for use in marriage liturgies. So it is to how the liturgies make use of Scripture that we would turn for greater insight into how the Church itself understands marriage, and the theological and ethical implications the Church draws from it. It is significant that the account of the wedding at Cana plays a principal role in this, rightly highlighting the transformative quality of marriage, in which two become one, and the relationship into which they enter gives a glimpse of the redemptive qualities of mutual self-giving, reflective of the new life in Christ that is the Church itself.

Union of heart, body, and mind

The classical Anglican marriage liturgy (1549-1662) betrays a degree of tension even in the introductory exhortation that serves as the liturgical prologue to the rite: the recollection of the transformative vision of the wedding at Cana is firmly planted next to distinctly earthly “causes” or purposes for the institution of marriage — including deliverance from the defiling snares of fornication. There is a palpable “already, but not yet” quality to this rite, which in its classical form includes the negative language alongside more positive references.

There is also significant tension between the *causal* or *purposeful* mode of the prologue and the active language of the vows themselves. The prologue — in particular, in its classical form, its emphasis on procreation — concerns itself with a productive value of what comes out of the marriage, what marriage is for. In contrast, the vows themselves focus on the *performative* aspect of what goes *into* the marriage, how marriage is actually to be lived out.

The emphasis on procreation and children — however important the former, and however crucial the welfare of the latter to human society — primarily as a purpose or end, relies on an ethic at odds with the principle outlined above, which is that people are to be treated as ends in themselves, rather than as means to another end, however good that end might be.

The same can be said for the spouses' use of each other as a "remedy for fornication," a cause for marriage that cannot help but avoid a degree of objectification. (This *remedial* cause — highlighted in earlier Anglican liturgies — has been downplayed or entirely omitted in more recent marriage liturgies.)

Procreation can become a problematical cause or purpose when it is understood primarily as an extrinsic end, rather than as the natural outgrowth of the loving couple treating each other as ends in themselves. It is acknowledged that as the end in this case is a human life, it has its own inestimable worth. It must also be noted that many, if not most couples, desire this end and work together toward its accomplishment; and that the generation of new life is a tangible expression of their mutual love.

However, although sometimes held as a *principal end*, it has never been held to be an *essential* one. Even the 1549 liturgy recognized that this particular end cannot be achieved by all marriages, by providing that the prayer for the couple's fruitfulness in procreation is to be "omitted where the Woman is past childbirth." These additional factors highlight that this aspect of marriage is about achieving an end, or not; and however good that end, that goodness does not remove the ethical problems that can arise when people treat each other as *means* by which some other end — however good — is achieved.

Children are a gift and a grace and a hope — but ought not be understood as an *extrinsic* expectation or demand, in the absence of which a marriage is deemed to have failed in some *intrinsic* way. Moreover, the greater and more fully realized the love of a couple for each other, the more likely any child who becomes part of the growing family, by birth or adoption, will be nurtured and raised in a way that expresses the familial virtues. A bad marriage is unlikely to be "saved" by the introduction of children, which may add more tensions and stresses to it: this is hardly fair to the child.

It can be observed that the emphasis on procreation represents a Genesis 1 attitude, while an emphasis on companionship reflects the narrative in Genesis 2. However, it is also helpful to note that Genesis 1 does not employ marital language, and procreation is more closely tied to sexuality (being "male and female") and to the "filling of the earth" — language echoing that applied to the birds and the fish in the previous verses, also commanded to "be fruitful and multiply" so as to "fill the waters" and the sky. The emphasis in Genesis 1 is on sex as necessary for procreation, not marriage.

The emphasis in Genesis 2, however, is companionship — that the human one should not be alone — rather than on filling the earth and subduing it. The "Adam" itself (Heb. *ha Adam*) is "Earth" by name and by origin, and cannot be satisfied by the companionship of the other creatures, themselves crafted from the same soil. Only one made from Adam's own substance can stand as a suitable companion, and it is Adam's recognition of this likeness that confirms the Lord God's work, the solution to the "not good-ness" of his former isolation.

The "problem" to be solved is innate in Adam, in his own solitary existence, and it is the discovery of the "helper suitable" that the problem finds its solution, not any subsequent act or production. Variable times of "prosperity and adversity" will lie ahead, but the role of suitable — not subordinate — helper through it all is a constant. (The man's later dominion over the woman is an artifact of the fall. "In the beginning" the couple stands side by side. The Hebrew word for helper is used of God in relation to humanity, so no inferiority or subordination is implied in this term. In fact, it is the one who needs help who is arguably the inferior.)

Some have noted that Jesus combined the two Genesis accounts in his teaching on marriage in Matthew 19:4-5, citing the creation of "male and female" and the "one flesh" joining as the source for holding marriage to be indissoluble. This passage receives considerable attention in the paper on marriage as vocation. However, in terms of the ethical concerns raised here, it is important to note that the indissolubility of the relationship is the focus of Jesus' concern, not sex as such or sexuality.

Moreover, Jesus was likely teaching in Aramaic in which, as is the case with the Hebrew of Genesis 1, the words *male* and *female* are nouns, better translated as “a male and a female” so that, as Jesus says, “the two shall become one flesh” (in contrast to the Hebrew of Genesis 2:24, which includes no number). In the same way, and using the same text, the Dead Sea Qumran community also informed its teaching on marriage discipline, asserting the divine rule for monogamy on the basis of God only having created “a male and a female” (Damascus Document 4:20f). Both in the Qumran community and in the teaching of Jesus, the focus is on the couple as a couple, not on the productive value of procreation.

From the beginning of the Church’s reflection on the substance of marriage, including the recorded teaching of Jesus himself, the primary emphasis of marriage, expressed in the vows — the essence or substance of the marriage — lies in the spouses themselves and in the indissoluble union of heart, body, and mind that is achieved by means of that marriage.

Still, it is fair to note that, in a way, the tension between the two creation accounts (except as harmonized by Jesus) reflects a tension that is carried forward in the classical Anglican marriage rite: a tension between the prologue and the vows. For, as with the second creation account, there is no reference to procreation in the vows themselves — unsurprising in itself, for who could make such a solemn promise?

This suggests an awareness on the part of the composers of the rite that while a productive or ends-achieving ethic of utility may underlie the expectations of the prologue (as they do the creation of humanity in Genesis 1), a duty- or virtue-based ethic informs the vows, the couple turned to face each other, finding in the other the one “suitable” to each, and fulfilling both the vows and each other in their shared lives. The tensions in the rite between prologue and vows, as in Genesis 1 and 2, reflect a distinction between two models for understanding marriage: “dynastic” — productively looking toward the next generation — and “conjugal” — performatively focused upon the love of the couple themselves.

The emphasis on procreation stands as the first “cause” of the traditional prologue, as it does in Genesis 1, and also in current discussions on marriage, even though most current marriage liturgies have reduced the emphasis upon it, noting that it is provisional rather than essential, intrinsic, or inherent in marriage as marriage. As noted above, even the earliest Anglican rite of 1549 recognized that the productive value, while important, could not be understood as *necessary*, since not all marriages lead to procreation.

This is perhaps a tacit admission that, as Kant would put it, the principal end of marriage must be found in the couple themselves, and in their life together, as well as in a pragmatic recognition that marriages are not always procreative even when that is the couple’s intent — and a couple incapable of procreation cannot reasonably intend it — but they are always meant to be loving and faithful. As noted above, a child coming into a loving and faithful context, whether by birth or adoption, is more likely to grow to be a loving and faithful person.

Another reason for finding the locus of the sign of marriage incarnate in the couple themselves lies in language added to the vows and included in the prologue in 1549. As Diarmaid MacCulloch helpfully notes:

... [Cranmer] newly added the promise by the groom “to love and to cherish,” and by the wife “to love, cherish and obey,” as the climax of their vows to each other. And for the first time in an official liturgical marriage text, marriage was announced as being “for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.” Few medieval theologians would have extended the reasons for marriage beyond the avoidance for sin and the begetting of children; the classical list of Thomas Aquinas was *fides, proles, sacramentum*, with no mention of enjoyment. However, the Archbishop had had at least 16 years’ experience of Margaret Cranmer’s society, help, and comfort in prosperity and adversity when he and his drafting team finalized these words. This was an innovation that his married friend Martin Bucer greatly approved so much that when Bucer was

suggesting his revisions for the 1549 rite, he unsuccessfully urged that it should be moved to appear as the first of the three stated reasons for marriage. (MacCulloch, 421)

It should be noted that Bucer has finally had his way: the American BCP 1979 reordered the prologue's "causes," as has the revised version of the prologue in the English Common Worship Marriage Service. American versions of the marriage liturgy, dating back to 1785, had originally removed all causal language from the prologue, thereby placing emphasis upon the estate itself, and the couple entering it by means of their vows, rather than upon its intentions or outcomes. Causal language was reintroduced in the 1979 BCP, but reordered so as to place emphasis on mutual joy and support as the best locus for the possible procreation and nurture of children.

Unlike the language of the prologue, the vows are unconditional; they are not based on purposes, ends, or goals. The duties described in the vows all relate to the couple themselves, and to their mutual behavior toward one another. Moreover, the vows are to perform things of which they are capable *in themselves and for each other*; and thus the absence of a vow to have children; even if it is an intent, its fulfillment cannot be *promised*, or made a *condition* or *basis* for the marriage at its outset or in its continuation.

Infertility — the inability to procreate — is neither an impediment to marriage nor a cause for divorce or annulment of marriage. (It has to be acknowledged, however, that where a "dynastic" model has been primary — literally so in royal marriages — infertility has played a part in finding ways to end marriages.)

Ideally, the spouses find in each other an appropriate end, rather than the means to some other end or objective, however good. Procreation does have virtue, in the bringing to be of human life, and it is a good toward which human endeavor in marriage is well intended when possible, growing out of the love of the couple for each other, rather than simply as an intended (or unintended) consequence.

But it is also important to note that the love of a couple for each other can result in other goods for the benefit both of the couple and the society of which they form a part, even when procreation either cannot or does not take place. There is a generativity that comes with the "mutual society" of marriage and which spills over to the larger society in which the couple lives and participates. It is perhaps good to note that the water jars at Cana were filled to the brim, and that the very act of dipping out the wine must have caused some overflow. The sheer abundance of goods that flow from the good of the couple's mutual self-giving is multiplied and expanded in a social setting.

This is perhaps nowhere so eloquently expressed as in the case of couples who adopt children whose biological parents are unable or unwilling to raise them. It is no accident that adoption is also a powerful Pauline metaphor for the church, set beside marriage in Ephesians (1:15) and primary in Romans 8 and Galatians 4. The paper on marriage as vocation expands upon this understanding of generativity and fruitfulness, in particular as an acknowledgement that we are all children of God by adoption.

Love as context and fulfillment

"Love" is a loaded word. It can, in the present context, all too often be understood only in the sense of *romance* or *affection*. Love, like marriage, is not just about romance or affection, although it can and should include them.

Love is rightly to be understood in terms of the will as much as of the emotions. It is in this sense that love forms a part of both the betrothal promises and the vows. Each member of the couple is asked, "Will you love ...?"; and promises that they will, and then vows "to love and to cherish ..." So the problem is not that love has somehow become mixed up with marriage. The problem is that love — and marriage — have been misunderstood to be primarily about romantic feelings, and not about the commitment of each to the other in a mutual self-giving to and for the other, permanently and exclusively.

Fidelity within marriage is supported by the active will to love. In this sense, marriage is love made real, literally personified in the couple who lives out those vows, just as Jesus Christ revealed that the “greatest love” in giving himself for the life of his friends — not in marriage (except as understood figuratively in his marriage to the church), but in his life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension — which is the “mysterious” message of Ephesians.

Although it has been suggested that until the 20th century, marriages were concerned primarily or narrowly with property and progeny (an impression fueled largely by a focus on legal matters and the concerns of the propertied classes, sometimes literally “dynastic” in reference to the nobility or royalty), this view tends to ignore the rich evidence that attests to the importance of love and personal attachment in marriage, even among those very propertied classes and royalty. Where, after all, would Shakespeare be without love and the marriages it leads to?

More important, the biblical testimony bears witness to the contrast between the dynastic and conjugal models. This distinction is well documented in the Genesis account of Jacob’s toil for his beloved Rachel and his disappointment with the discovery that Leah has been substituted as his bride — the situation of the two women representing a conflict between personal love and cultural conventions.

Similarly, Elkanah put this in numerical terms when he comforted his childless wife Hannah with the touching reminder that he is dearer to her “than ten sons” (1 Samuel 1:8). Even in a culture and religious tradition in which procreation was seen as the first commandment, and which allowed divorce or polygamy on the basis of infertility (as in Elkanah’s case), we have a poignant witness that a loving marriage is not necessarily about having children. Love is generative even when it is not procreative.

Karl Barth put this internal focus on the couple in clear terms, laying particular stress upon the account in Genesis 2. In what might be seen as a rebuttal to the causal language in the classical marriage liturgy’s prologue (in particular the emphasis on procreation and avoidance of sin), he says:

[M]arriage as a life-partnership cannot be made to subserve the mere purpose of satisfying sexual needs ... fulfilling the impulse for procreation and training of children and therefore the ends of the family ... [It] is not a means to an end, but a life-form *sui generis* to be maintained and developed according to its own inner meanings and claims ... Marriage is not subordinate to the family, but the family (the relationship between parents and children which is itself an independent form) to marriage ... It subsists even without founding a family, even as the life-partnership of a possibly childless marriage. Marriage is necessarily *coniugium*, but not necessarily *matrimonium*. (Barth, 188)

That is, the spouses, but not necessarily parents, are always joined together. The 1978 report of the Church of England Marriage Commission stated a similar conclusion. Although it begins, demurring from Barth’s outright rejection, with an affirmation that marriage “caters for certain fundamental and universal human needs and potentials,” among which are the provision of “a secure and stable environment for the nurture of children,” it continues by observing:

[W]e do not believe that ... marriage is best understood as “for” children. We, on the other hand, wish to affirm that marriage is best understood as “for” husband and wife. It is their relationship with each other which is the basis of marriage. On this is built their relationship with their children. Arguments, therefore, in favour of the life-long nature of the married relationship must be seen to stem from the character of the husband-wife relationship itself, whether or not there are children. (General Synod 1978; 86, 33)

This echoes the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19: the permanence of the couple rests on the fact that they have become one in marriage. As noted earlier, in reflection on marriage as a “sign of Christ’s love for the

Church,” marriage forms the context in which loving spouses “become who they are” — a spouse “becomes” a spouse by virtue of relation to and with the other spouse.

Children can be conceived and born and raised apart from marriage, but marriage itself only exists between the spouses and in the context of their marriage, and it is marriage that makes them spouses, as they make the marriage, and it is the commitment to a lifelong, loving, faithful relationship — stated in the vows — that distinguishes marriage from other more casual forms of relationship.

As argued earlier, there is no real abstract “institution” of marriage but only actual, realized, incarnate instances of marriage. The ethical good that resides in real marriages — like any real “good” — is not theoretical but practical; it rests on the degree to which mutual love is expressed unconditionally, faithfully, and permanently, growing out of a union of heart, body, and mind.

It might be helpful to look at another family relationship in a similar light: The estate of being a “father” or a “mother” comes to be with conception and birth — biological processes shared by humans with many species. But being a good parent involves much more than the biological; and, most important from a biblical standpoint, parenthood is an estate that can be entered into by adoption, in which a new relationship is formed based not on a genetic heritage but on a commitment to responsibilities and the acquisition of new rights. Marriage is always such a voluntary commitment. The importance of choice or being chosen is explored at greater length in the paper on marriage as vocation.

This *elective* or *volitional* understanding of marriage — based on choice rather than necessity, on will rather than compulsion — can frame marriage as an “end” in eschatological terms, an end-in-itself anticipating but also making real some of the foretaste of the consummate joy of the union of all members in Christ the head. In this it rightly reflects the celebratory wine of Cana rather than the purposeful water of purification.

Understood in this way, marriage can take a place next to celibacy as an eschatological sign, separated from the purposefulness of marriage for procreation — necessary in this world to continue the species, but no longer needed in “the resurrection” (Luke 20:34-36). An earthly marriage can serve, as Paul suggests, as a “sign” of the mystical marriage given further elucidation in Revelation (19, 21) — of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem — a marriage in which procreation is not posited, as “the children of God” (by adoption) have been incorporated into the bride herself, whom Christ loves as his own body.

So it is that 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 fulfill 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 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.

The implications of this understanding, in light of Barth’s observation that “the question of posterity has lost its decisive significance in the time of the new covenant” (Barth, 189), opens a helpful path by which to explore the moral value to be found in all marriages, including same-sex marriages, as such couples can, as spouses, fulfill all of these moral duties.

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.

Facing the challenge

The biblical and theological framework described in this report could be critiqued for selecting and highlighting some elements of the tradition — scriptural, liturgical, and canonical — at the expense of others. However, 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, who dismissed an aspect of the Law of Moses, describing it as an allowance not in keeping with the more fundamental nature of marriage. That most churches, including The Episcopal Church, have also since nuanced Jesus’ teaching on the indissolubility of marriage is perhaps worth noting. See the paper on the history of the canon law for details.

This paper has attempted to examine the moral aspects of marriage. In doing so it has drawn on Scripture, emphasizing the importance of dutiful, mutual love and service rather than dominance and submission. In the past the tendency has been to fix proper roles on the basis of gender by highlighting some aspects of the scriptural testimony at the expense of other aspects. For example, in Pauline writings, concepts of male headship came to be read apart from his equally clear call to mutual submission (1 Corinthians 11:3,11-12).

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.

It may seem ironic, given his negative words on homosexuality in *Church Dogmatics* III.4, to have brought Karl Barth back into the discussion. However, conversation from late in his life, attested in a letter from Eberhard Busch written at Barth’s direction, reveal that he had second thoughts about what he referred to as his “incidental comments” about homosexuality in his earlier work, his openness to revisiting the subject, and his regrets that his health and energy did not allow him the scope to undertake a formal reevaluation (Rodgers, 114).

The Church does not have the excuse of such fatigue or lack of energy, and it is incumbent upon it to do the best it can in its careful consideration of the theology of marriage. In this effort, the questions, “Can a same-sex couple serve as an image for Christ and the church?” and “Can the moral values evident in Christ’s self-sacrificing love be lived out by a same-sex couple?” will have to be answered in light of the foregoing discussion.

In that light, the answer to both questions is the same as it is for a mixed-sex couple — that is, in the affirmative, that a couple who love each other sacrificially, mutually, faithfully, and exclusively are reflective of the love of God in Christ, to the extent that human flesh is capable of bearing that reflection.

Clearly, some difficulties remain, and for some these difficulties are insuperable. It is sometimes said that the reason only a mixed-sex couple can marry is based on the fact that only such a couple demonstrates a kind of complementary “unity in difference.” Proponents of traditional understandings of marriage often claim that since same-sex relationships do not reflect this complementarity, such relationships represent an intrinsic disordering of God’s creative ordering of human sexuality, and so ought not to be blessed.

So too, others assert that although same-sex relationships should be blessed as a distinct good that the Church has now discerned, nevertheless traditional marriage as many now understand it should retain a privileged status in large part due to the complementarity of the couple. These ideas are explored at greater length in the essay on marriage as vocation.

However, it is worth noting once more that 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.

4. Reflection on the Vows

N. and N., you have come here today to seek the blessing of God and of his Church upon your marriage. I require, therefore, that you promise, with the help of God, to fulfill the obligations which Christian marriage demands. (BCP, 433)

These words begin the liturgy for the blessing of a civil marriage in the Book of Common Prayer. This rite is used for those couples already married in a civil ceremony who desire, as the liturgy states, God's blessing and that of the Church upon that marriage, and then make promises consistent with those made in The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage (BCP, 424).

As we explore what makes a marriage holy or what makes a marriage a Christian marriage, we can take the opening words of this liturgy as a clear indicator of what is intended in marriage — what it is upon which the blessing of God and the Church is to be invoked; the *substance* of the marriage that is to find concrete fulfillment in the couple's faithful living of their solemn vows, enacting the obligations which Christian marriage demands. “Obligations” and “demands” are strong words that indicate to the couple and to all who witness the rite the seriousness of that to which they are committed. These words echo the caution in the opening exhortation of the marriage rite itself, which reminds the couple that marriage “is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly” (BCP, 423).

This is holy and serious business — holy in part because it is held up as such by the Church as witnessed to by our liturgy. The act of blessing that which already is — in this case the marriage and the couple — is both a recognition and a consecration, a graced moment between what has been and what is to be.

In 2000, General Convention adopted Resolution D039, which sets out expectations that the Church has of lifelong, committed, monogamous relationships. These expectations witness to the “obligations which Christian marriage demands.” The resolution lists the expectations that the Church holds dear in all such relationships, saying they will “be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables such relationships to see in each other the image of God.”

The resolution goes on to “denounce promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members” and emphasizes accountability by stating “this church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values.” This is a profound statement solidly based in the ethics and virtues, the demands and obligations of holy living.

In many ways, the resolution builds on and even strengthens the actual vows in the prayer book (BCP, 427). Expectations are clear, and accountability is clearly stated. Most important, God is in the midst of it all, as the kind of love needed to accomplish these expectations will be *holy love* that shows forth the love of God and reminds the couple to seek and serve God as imaged in each other. When they do this, they become an icon of the love of God to the wider community.

The vows in the BCP (427) are ancient and familiar, powerful in their own right. Each member of the couple proclaims the vows to the other, in the Name of God. As the true ministers of the rite, the couple makes these solemn vows before God and witnesses — but the vows are made directly to each other. The familiar words remind all couples of the difficulties they face in marriage — better or worse, sick or well, rich or poor, through all this and in spite of any subsequent conditions short of death itself, the will to love and to cherish remains as the chief obligation and duty. The use of “cherish” adds to the promise to love an implication of a tenderness of affection that gives a glimpse of that special, unconditional love that God has for us, and which Christ has for his bride, the Church.

The demands of marriage as the site of blessing

What does Christian marriage demand? Both resolution D039 and the BCP marriage liturgies link the solemn vows with God. Seeing the image of God in your spouse, asking God's blessing upon your union: these liturgical acts and exhortations wrap these powerful promises in holy language. This same holy language is even echoed in the liturgy Thanksgiving for Adoption of a Child (BCP, 441) that allows the child, if old enough, to “take” his or her mother and/or father. The taking is mutual, and a family is the result, blessed and marked liturgically.

When exploring how our marriage vows help us understand what makes a marriage holy, a brief glance at some history is helpful. The current vows in the 1979 BCP continue to use phrases such as “to have and to hold.” This was originally intended to protect the rights to property and the “taking care of” the bride. Previous iterations included words about the dowry. Marriage as a contract that had to do with property, rights, and inheritance had little or no theological underpinning.

However, as deeper reflection on the moral and theological virtues was undertaken, the Church took a higher view of the vows, while retaining some of the old language. Eventually, the promise of the bride to “obey” was removed, making the vows identical for both bride and groom. The vows evolved into holy language intent on sacred promises to each other made by the true ministers of the rite, focused on covenant terms that not only bind the couple together, but also remind us of God's covenant promises to God's people.

As noted above, Cranmer's expansion of the vows in the 1549 prayer book led even more to casting the demands and obligations as *sanctifying* love more than as merely contractual fulfillment. The 1979 BCP moves us further in that direction, and resolution D039 from GC 2000 continues that pattern in more specific terms and extends the expectations to unmarried couples in committed relationships. It is the commitment that transforms the relationship from casual to faithful, and it is the commitment that is sanctified by the blessing of the Church.

What makes a marriage holy? For Christians, the solemn vows of fidelity and love until death are promised and made, and the gathered Church witnesses and blesses this new commitment. “From this day forward” the couple “takes” each other, creating a new reality in their union as one in heart, body, and mind. It is this

relationship that has been imbued with the Holy Spirit through prayer and blessing in the Name of God, which points to what makes a marriage holy.

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