

ESSAY 2: Christian Marriage as Vocation

Introduction: A Vocation to Study Marriage

In this moment in the life of The Episcopal Church, we are in active, church-wide discernment on several fronts about how we are called to proclaim the Good News. We do this work grounded in an array of contexts within The Episcopal Church, mindful of our membership in the Anglican Communion and the wider Body of Christ. By passing resolution A050 and forming the Task Force on the Study of Marriage, the 77th General Convention in 2012 identified the study of marriage as an important component of that wider discernment.

The work of this Task Force has emerged from a series of conversations over several decades on our understanding of human difference and how the Church is called to honor and embody that difference. This paper operates on the premise that this ongoing conversation is an important facet of our central mission: to be agents of Christ's ministry of reconciliation in the Church and in the world.

It also proposes that just as we are coming to recognize the place of this conversation in our wider ecclesial vocation at this moment, we also have an opportunity to consider — or perhaps, more accurately, to reconsider and in some ways to reinterpret — Christian marriage as a vocation. It presents marriage as a spiritual practice, a particular vowed manner of life meant to be engaged over the course of a lifetime. The sections that follow unpack that vocation more fully: a call to love, to union in the midst of difference, to fidelity and stability, to growth and generativity, and ultimately to eschatological communion with God and one another.

1. An Emerging Framework

More immediately than the Church's decades-long conversation, reflections received by the Task Force during this triennium helped crystallize this paper's vocational framework. As the Task Force met, publicized its work, and received input from various corners of the Church, one theme (among several) that surfaced repeatedly was a concern about how marriage has factored into our collective ecclesial conversations in recent years. This message was, essentially: do not overemphasize the significance of marriage within Christian life. Do not make it the absolute center, the end-all, be-all of human relationships. Remember singleness. Remember friendship. Remember the emerging web of intentional communities in which units of family, of holy households, are in various quarters being discovered anew. (Some of this feedback is also reflected in the Task Force papers on the history of Christian marriage, marriage as a rite of passage, and changing trends and norms.)

Single people asked please not to be relegated to second-class citizenship.¹ Some couples reported struggling with ecclesial pressure to marry either before they were ready to do so or despite not feeling called to do so. This strain of feedback also tended to emphasize the ways in which Christian marriage has been entangled historically with patterns of social inequality and injustice (as reflected in the Task Force papers, "A History of Christian Marriage" and "Changing Trends and Norms in Marriage").

Mindful of this particular feedback, it is important to underscore that marriage is a manner of life that should not be assumed or imposed but freely discerned. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus acknowledges that marriage is not a universal vocation. In response to the disciples who wonder aloud whether it might be

¹ As the Primate's Theological Commission of the Anglican Church of Canada on the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions has written, "It is clear that, while Christianity has historically upheld the sanctity of the single state, regardless of whether or not it is lived out in the context of a vow of celibacy, there have been and are now many cultures that expect each person to be part of a couple or family, and are suspicious and judgmental of any expression of the single life, including celibate clergy." The St. Michael Report, Section 18. See <http://www.anglican.ca/primate/ptc/smr/>.

“better not to marry” given Jesus’ strong strictures against divorce, he replies that “not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given” (Matthew 19:11).

To assume that marriage is a universal, default manner of life to which all adults are called would implicitly devalue those who do not marry. Indeed, as David Runcorn has argued in the context of the Church of England’s conversation, “part of the gift of this debate [concerning sexuality and marriage] is that it is reminding the Church that human beings need a wider range of relationships in community than just the model of marriage.”²

Further, to assume that marriage is a universal human vocation would belie important New Testament witnesses that critique marriage or emphasize singleness. In his first letter to the Corinthians, for instance, Paul wishes that “all were as I myself am” — that is, single and celibate. But, he continues, “each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind” (1 Corinthians 7:7).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asserts that while “those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:34-36). As much scholarship has shown (including the Task Force paper, “A History of Christian Marriage”), the New Testament is far from univocal in its portrayals of marriage, whether affirming or critical.³

Yet even if biblical and historical descriptions of marriage have varied, even if marriage has been critiqued justly for its long tendency to be embedded in patterns of social privilege and injustice, Christian marriage need not be summed up by this history. Neither should it be reduced to an unthinking concession to social custom or ecclesial conformity.

Indeed, Task Force feedback also reflected a desire for theologically robust reflection on how Christian marriage emerges from the richness and complexity of our tradition. Couples, as well as single people anticipating marriage down the road, reflected a desire to discern carefully whether and when they might be called to marriage. How might they know if they are ready to marry a particular person, or if they are called to marriage at all? How many of the tracks of adult life should be laid down before entering into a marriage?

Or, conversely, what role might marriage have in stabilizing and grounding lives in the midst of transition? Indeed, what relationship might marriage have to change and stability? How might discernment of a call to parenthood intersect with and remain distinct from that of marriage? These responses requested reflection on how Christian marriage might invite people more deeply into their lives of faith (a topic addressed at length in “A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage”).

Underlying this range of reflections and questions was a broad query: to what forms of relationship are we being called as individuals, as couples, as communities, as members of Christ’s body? Routed through the charge of the Task Force, these inquiries helped raise a more focused question: how might a theological frame of marriage, understood as a vocation, aid the wider discernment of the Church as well as of individual church members?

² David Runcorn, Appendix 4, in *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 2013), 193.

³ See, for example, Adrian Thatcher, chapter 3, in *Marriage after Modernity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999); Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006); Mary Ann Tolbert, “Marriage and Friendship in the Christian New Testament: Ancient Resources for Contemporary Same-Sex Unions,” in M. Jordan, M. Sweeney, and D. Mellott, eds., *Authorizing Marriage: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 41-51.

Now more than ever, we as a church are called to articulate marriage as a living Christian vocation, to invite its discernment as a manner of life that, both like and unlike other vocations, enables its participants to engage in their wider call to love, to union, to relational fidelity and stability, and to generativity and growth as members of Christ's body.

2. Vocation and Discernment

"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.

Vocation can speak to specific life professions, to particular messages we are challenged to convey in and to the world (as in the examples of the biblical prophets and of Jesus' disciples), to modes of relationship (as in the calls to parenthood by the patriarchs and matriarchs and to Mary the God-bearer), to broader ways of engaging the world that God created (as in Paul's enjoinder in 2 Corinthians 5:20 "be reconciled to God").

Connected to vocation is discernment: the process of receiving clarity about what one may be called to do. Discernment entails prayer and reflection, conversation, new perception, and decision. It is both individual and communal.⁴ Most important, it entails creating space to perceive and receive what the Holy Spirit may be prodding an individual or a community to do, as distinct from what an individual or community may feel inclined to do on their own. The phrase from Matthew 19:11 regarding those who are called to marriage and those who are not commonly is translated, "not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given."⁵

Yet the verb translated as "accept," *chorousin*, is also spatial. It means "to leave space, to make room," to "move forward, to advance," or "to have room for receiving" something. Space is opened for something that is "given" (*dedotai*), a gift both freely bestowed and received. Discernment creates space in a spirit of God-given freedom. As John Chrysostom (c. 347-407 C.E.) remarks regarding this Matthew 19 phrase, it is not "shut up in the compulsion of a law." Rather, because of God's "unspeakable gentleness," we are free to receive and to heed the promptings and trajectories of the God who made us and calls us.⁶ Through this process the Holy Spirit ultimately leads us into all truth, sometimes in ways we never could have anticipated, and may indeed have difficulty bearing (John 16:12-13).

3. A Vocation of Love

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

⁴ The report, *To Set Our Hope on Christ* (written by a group of Episcopal theologians at the request of Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold) also uses language of discernment with respect to the current church-wide conversation on sexuality and marriage. *To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report 135* (New York: The Episcopal Church Center, 2005), 8-9: "[W]e believe that God has been opening our eyes to acts of God that we had not known how to see before" (9).

⁵ Matthew 19: 11, NRSV. All subsequent biblical quotations will also be from the NRSV unless otherwise specified.

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homily 62.3 on the Gospel of Matthew in ed. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 10, *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 384.

⁷ Thomas Breidenthal has also argued that "true romantic love is a form of the love of neighbor." *Sacred Unions: A New Guide to Lifelong Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2006), 11. See especially, chapter 2. Breidenthal goes on to argue that "[j]ust as the romantic tradition [of the troubadours whose lyric poetry emerged around the eleventh century C.E. in what is now southern France] helped the Christian world rediscover the marriage of man and woman as a spiritual vocation, so now, as we struggle to extend our understanding of that vocation to include partners

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).

The first letter of John further develops that vocation: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). By loving, we come to know and to share the divine life of the One who “wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored us.”⁸ “In your infinite love you made us for yourself,” intones Eucharistic prayer A of the 1979 prayer book, echoing the language of Augustine of Hippo’s (354-430 C.E.) *Confessions*. In response to that love, our whole lives form a pattern of restlessly seeking the One in whom our ultimate rest is to be found.⁹

Augustine’s contemporary Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395 C.E.) envisioned that loving search as a process of stretching forth (*epektasis*), in which we participate in God’s unending desire for us. Through lives prayerfully lived, always stretching forth toward the heart of the living God, we can become vessels for the outpouring of God’s desire. Throughout our lifetimes, we open our hearts and are repeatedly filled with that desire, as God continuously expands our capacity for it. This loving vocation never ends.¹⁰

This vocation further emerges from the fundamental Christian teachings of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. To love is to offer ourselves to one another, inspired by and grounded in the love with which Christ poured himself into our midst, reconciling us to the God from whom we had grown estranged. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” Jesus teaches in the fifteenth chapter of John. We respond to that love, he continues, as his friends, appointed to bear the fruit of that love in lives offered to God and to one another (John 15:12-17).

This love catalyzes us to live lives of solidarity and sympathy, in imitation of the One who is always able sympathize with us in our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). In love our lives bear witness to the mystery of resurrection life, healing our death-dealing wounds of betrayal and brokenness, refreshing and renewing our very creation. In Christ we lovingly join our own lives to the bridge he reforged between creation and the God in whose image we are made.

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.”

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 of the same sex, that tradition emerges once again as a fruitful starting point and a rich resource for that discussion” (*Sacred Unions*, 26).

⁸ Collect “Of the Incarnation,” *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 252.

⁹ Eucharistic Prayer A, *Book of Common Prayer*, 362. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.1 in trans. F.J. Sheed, *Confessions Books I-XIII* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 3.

¹⁰ Gregory expounds this idea of *epektasis* in several texts, including the *Life of Moses* and his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Note also that Gregory does not hesitate to use the term “desire” to describe the driving force of this process. For more on Gregory of Nyssa’s ideas of desire and gender, see Sarah Coakley’s *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), chapters 7-9. See also Coakley’s *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, in which she argues that human desire originates in that of the Triune God who is ultimately “the means of [human desire’s] transformation.” *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

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.

4. Union and Difference

As with love, a vocation to marriage calls couples into a particular sort of union that is always already caught up in a wider call to be one. What is often called marriage's unitive quality bears out in its own manner Jesus' "new commandment" to "love one another" and to be one just as he and the Father are one (John 17:21). This union both joins us together and rejoices in our particularity, our difference. At a fundamental, sacramental level, our call to union emerges from our baptism in which we are engrafted into the wider Body of Christ.

Throughout our lives we live out our membership in that body in various ways: as we receive communion week by week, as we seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves (Baptismal Covenant, 1979 BCP, 305). When we pray "that we all may be one" (1979 BCP, 387) we open our hearts to unions of affinity and difference, to friendship, to family, to wide-ranging collectives of work and home, to our Church, flung far and wide around the globe.

"Cleaving" and creation

The unitive vocation in Christian marriage emerges in important ways from how we have read the creation stories. As Christians, we read the stories of our creation through New Testament as well as Hebrew biblical lenses. These include Jesus' own interpretive citations. Despite his own life of (apparent) singleness and his critical reflections on ideas of family in his imperial Roman context (again, see "A History of Christian Marriage" and footnote 3 above), Jesus clearly also respects and envisions a place for marriage. As mentioned earlier, he goes on to imply in Matthew 19 that marriage is a vocation "given" (*dedotai*) to many, even as there are others to whom it is not.¹¹

Jesus' explanation of this vocation (in 19:3-12, paralleled by Mark 10:2-12) emerges in response to a question from the Pharisees about divorce. While Moses allowed divorce "because of your hardness of heart," Jesus replies, "from the beginning it was not so." Citing the conclusion of the first creation story, Genesis 1:27, he asserts that "the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female.'" Without citing the Genesis 1:28 command "be fruitful and multiply," he then continues directly with a citation from Genesis 2:24: "For this reason a man [*anthropos*] shall leave his father and mother and be joined [*kollethesetai*] to his wife [*gynaiki*], and the two¹² shall become one flesh [*hoi duo eis sarka mian*]."¹³

¹¹ In Matthew 19, Jesus goes on to explain that there are those to whom what he has just said about marriage and divorce does not apply, or is not given: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." This passage has a long tradition of being read in support of the vocation of virginity or celibacy — of considering celibacy a higher calling than marriage (re: "it is better not to marry"). More recent scholarship has underscored the various roles and constructions of *eunouchoi* in Roman imperial and later Byzantine contexts, as well as the implications of Jesus' acknowledgment of people who complicate or exceed the sexual binary of male and female. See, for instance, Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Kathryn Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Walter Stevenson "Eunuchs and Early Christianity," in S. Tougher, ed., *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (London: Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002). For contemporary theological explorations of this ancient category, particularly with regard to intersex people / people with disorders of sexual development (DSD), see Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010).

¹² As the paper, "A Biblical and Theological Framework for Marriage" also points out, in the Hebrew of Genesis 2:24 the verb is simply plural, whereas the Septuagint, which Jesus here quotes, supplies *hoi duo*, "the two."

When we marry one another as Christians we take up this created possibility of shared embodiment. We reverence God's own creative handiwork, becoming "one flesh" in new ways. Further, Jesus' citations signal the creative force unleashed when a couple shifts the balance of its relational identity from families of origin to one another. Here the verb *kollao* — to weld, to glue together, or perhaps, most accurately, "to cleave to" (as the King James Version translates it) — speaks to the complex dynamics of this creative shift. To cleave is to join at a deep level, both sexual and spiritual, to direct and channel one's deep desire. Yet to cleave is also to cut through or split, to part. The cleaving of marriage could be said to reform families by shifting their borders — often enlarging them through the inheritance of the spouse's family, but ultimately shifting the particular quality of earlier familial attachments.¹⁴ Once it is vowed, once that cleaving has been liturgically enacted, to undo it is a very serious matter.¹⁵ The cleaving of marriage has creative reverberations.

Complementarity considered

Jesus' juxtaposed reading of the Genesis creation accounts has contributed to a relatively recent thread that sees in Christian marriage the fulfillment of the created meaning of male and female. And although Jesus' comments on marriage do not address procreation (again, he declines to cite Genesis 1:28: "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it"), the above referenced passage (and its Markan parallel) has been paired with other key texts to ground the meaning and significance of marriage in binary sexual difference as well as in the human capacity to procreate. In this way, the unitive quality of marriage has at times been conflated with the procreative capacity that many, though not all, couples possess.¹⁶ The question of how the vocation of marriage takes up and expresses the wider Christian call to growth and generativity will be addressed more fully below, in section 6. Here, however, the question is whether the vocation of Christian marriage must center on the binary sexual difference of male and female.

Christian theology has a long tradition of reading marriage through the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Indeed, Christian "nuptial theology" tends to unfold the mystical interface of our Christology and our ecclesiology through the lens of marriage, dwelling in particular on the imagery of Ephesians 5, as well as on Christological readings of the Song of Songs. The task force paper exploring marriage within a wider theological arc treats the Ephesians passage at some length. The analogies between Christ and the Church, husband and wife, male and female have long been interpreted in ways that limit marriage to heterosexual couples and that instantiate an asymmetry between husband and wife. In recent decades, some Christian theologians have framed this line of thought as "sexual complementarity" or simply "complementarity."¹⁷

As Adrian Thatcher has noted, while this idea can be nuanced in different ways, including in egalitarian modes, complementarity is usually used to argue that "God has planned and ordained heterosexual

¹³ This is an instance where the Greek term *anthropos*, often translated as "human being," when paired with *gyne*, "woman" or "wife," becomes gender specific: "man." Further, unlike in English, in both Greek and Hebrew the terms for "man" and "woman" can also be translated as "husband" and "wife."

¹⁴ The Task Force paper "Marriage as a Rite of Passage" discusses how, historically, betrothal practices allowed time for the new network of familial relationships to adjust and engage in their reconfiguration and growth.

¹⁵ This is why our own conversations as a church about divorce took time to sort out, concluding that divorce and remarriage in the church are possible only under careful, canonically governed discernment. See Canon 1.19 in *Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church* (2012), 60-61. See also the Task Force Paper on the history of the marriage canons.

¹⁶ For example, Goldingay et al. read Jesus' citations of Genesis in Mark 10 (which are the same as those in Matt 19) as implicitly including Genesis 1:28. The "divine intention of the union of male and female in one flesh ... entails the social, psychological, and physical union, including the fruitfulness of childbearing as part of the order of creation." John Goldingay, Grant LeMarquand, George Sumner, and Daniel Westberg, "Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology: A View from the Traditionalists," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no.1 (2001): 1-50. See also their discussion opposing the separation of the unitive from the procreative facets of Christian marriage, pp. 40-41.

¹⁷ For a description of this term see, for instance, Adrian Thatcher's discussion in *God, Sex, and Gender: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 185-86.

marriage as the sole framework for legitimate, holy, sexual relations.”¹⁸ In different ways and with distinct emphases, this idea has emerged in some Roman Catholic and evangelical Christian writings.¹⁹ It has also begun to appear in some Anglican contexts.²⁰ These contributions reveal how our conversation about marriage interfaces with and activates our broader understanding of the human person. 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?

Mystery of new humanity

Here, from the fifth chapter of Ephesians, the mystery that characterizes Christ’s relationship with the Church may offer a further way in which to understand the significance of difference in the union of marriage. After a call to “be subject to one another” in marriage (as also addressed in “A Biblical and Theological Framework for Marriage”), the author of Ephesians concludes with a quotation of Genesis 2:24, the same one cited by Jesus in Matthew 19: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” The letter then continues: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church.” The heart of marriage, that is, is a *mysterion*.

The concept of mystery expresses several key linked ideas in Ephesians. In its first chapter, the author uses the term to speak of the Good News itself: “With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery [to *mysterion*] 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.” In chapter three, the author proclaims that “this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:8-10).

The content of the Ephesians’ proclamation is “the boundless riches of Christ” and “the wisdom of God in its rich variety.” This wisdom is instantiated in Jesus Christ who, in chapter two, is described as having broken down the dividing wall, “creating one new humanity [*kainon anthropon*] in place of the two” — that is, eradicating the divisions between Jews and Gentiles (2:14-16). Marriage, then, comes to reflect this mystery in chapter five as it symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the Church.

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

¹⁸ Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender*, 186. An exception to this is the argument by Deirdre Good, Willis Jenkins, Cynthia Kittredge, and Eugene Rogers, that “male-female complementarity” can be read as “typical but not exhaustive of [marriage’s] witness.” Good et al., “A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 1 (2011): 57. Another exception is Eugene Rogers, “Same-Sex Complementarity: A Theology of Marriage,” *Christian Century*, May 11, 2011. <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-04/same-sex-complementarity>.

¹⁹ See, for example, Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006); Wayne Grudem and John Piper, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2006).

²⁰ See, for example: House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 10 (1.2.9); House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality, *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (aka *The Piling Report*), section 117, pp. 33-34, and appendix 4, https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf. Goldingay et al., “Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology: A View from the Traditionalists.”

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.

Indeed, as the Task Force paper, “Marriage as a Rite of Passage” explains, the union of difference in Christian marriages can serve as a prophetic crucible in contexts of communal strife and division. Adrian Thatcher has further asserted that “it is helpful to see the author [of Ephesians] beginning a trajectory towards a real Christian theology of marriage, which for its completion needed further time ... Being ‘subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (Eph. 5:21) is starting to change everything.”²² Marriages of same-sex couples can also play an important role in dispelling any notion that one spouse could ever represent Christ, or the Church, more than the other. The “Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” liturgy also signals the full equality of the couple as they carry out their role as “co-ministers.”²³ Therefore, 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 sexual orientation, can enable it to image forth the rich variety of creation more fully than it has been able to in centuries past.

5. Asceticism and Stability

While love draws a married couple together, what binds and helps sustain their union over time is what might be called its disciplined ascetic quality. For Christian marriage is, as others have argued, a vowed vocation.²⁴ Its vows create a covenant that binds the two spouses together, “as long as [they] both shall live.” The spousal declaration in “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” to “love, honor and keep” the beloved “in sickness and in health” and to be faithful to the beloved, “forsaking all others,” is an *askesis*, a spiritual practice (1979 BCP, 424).²⁵ It shares this vowed quality with forms of religious life in which community members make lifelong professions.

The apostle Paul reads marriage through an ascetic lens. After commenting to the community at Corinth, “I wish that all were as I am” — that is, single and celibate — he speaks of marriage as a concession or indulgence and not as a command. Marriage here works as a tether for those who are not called to a life of celibate singleness (1 Corinthians 7:6-7). Even as Paul wishes that all were like him, he steps back and points to the more fundamental vocational issue: “But each has a particular gift [*idion charisma*] from God, one

²² Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender*, 108.

²³ Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender*, 110, and *Marriage after Modernity*, 240.

²⁴ Good et al., “A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals,” 51, 62-63. “These vows mark marriage as an arduous form of training in virtue, by which the promises come true that God will heal human waywardness and teach us to love (Hos. 14:4; Jer. 3:22).”

²⁵ Good et al. explain: “Our approach combines the two New Testament values of asceticism and household: marriage is a school for virtue, a household asceticism: ‘for better for worse,’ ‘forsaking all others’ (1979 BCP, 427, 424).” “A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples,” 58. Eugene Rogers also makes this point, arguing that we ought to understand “marriage as an ascetic discipline, a particular way of practicing love of neighbor. The vows do this: ‘for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.’ Those ascetic vows — which Russian theologians compare to the vows of monastics — commit the couple to carry forward the solidarity of God and God’s people. Marriage makes a school for virtue, where God prepares the couple for life with himself by binding them for life to each other.” “Same-Sex Complementarity.”

having one kind and another a different kind” (1 Corinthians 7:7). A few verses later, once more he underscores: “Let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you” (1 Corinthians 7:17). The particular graces or charisms gifted to each of us from God can come to their fullest fruition through the relationships and commitments we form. Christian marriage is one such pattern of life that binds the married couple to one another, to the church family in whose presence they make their vows, and to the wider Body of Christ, whose membership they now engage afresh through the lens of marriage.

The vowed quality of Christian marriage enables it to become a particular kind of relational vessel. Unique to each couple, these vessels of marriage create a sense of stability strong enough to allow the couple to support each other “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health ... until [they] are parted by death” (1979 BCP, 427). These vows are meant not simply to be limit-setting promises, but also a deep source of life. Here the Johannine quality of “abiding” can illumine the vitality of this form of vowed stability.

In the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus unfolds the metaphor of the vine and the branches, declaring, “abide [*meinate*] in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:4-5a). The verb *meino*, “to abide” or “to remain,” here becomes not simply a delimiting command, but a source of life. By abiding in the vine as a branch, one remains attached to that from which life emerges. To abide in John’s Gospel is to dwell in divine love, to participate in it, to be transformed by it, to share it in community. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus continues, calling his disciples “friends.” The vows that help establish the vessel of a Christian marriage abide in that same love.

6. Vocation of Growth and Generativity

These vows of stability that help support and bind a married couple to one another also enable the couple to serve as a means of grace-filled growth. “The decision to give my word about my future love can be part of converting my heart,” writes Margaret Farley, “part of going out of myself truly to meet the one I love (not part of hardening my heart because of excessive fear of sanctions if I break the law that I give to my love).”²⁶ That conversion of heart can unfold through shared experience of vulnerability and trial as much as through joy and triumph. “Blessed are you, God of growth and discovery” intones a prayer from *A New Zealand Prayerbook*: “yours is the inspiration that has altered and changed our lives; yours is the power that has brought us to new dangers and opportunities. Set us, your new creation, to walk through this new world, watching and learning, loving and trusting, until your kingdom comes.”²⁷ The lifelong commitment vowed in marriage emerges from a desire to “gather up our whole future and place it in affirmation of the one we love,” even as we walk together through an unfolding future that remains unknown in fundamental ways. Our vows can ground and plant us even as love “grows into wholeness” over the course of a lifetime.²⁸

Abiding in God and in one another, a Christian marriage responds to Christ’s call in John 15 to “bear much fruit.” Here the idea of fruitfulness is first and foremost a reflection of the broader call to growth as members of Christ’s body.²⁹ As Paul urges in his letter to the Romans, we are called to align ourselves with the New Covenant, “to bear fruit for God” (Romans 7:4). At the same time, our own birthing is most

²⁶ Margaret Farley, “The Meaning of Commitment,” in Kieran Scott and Michael Warren, eds., *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155.

²⁷ A concluding collect from the Eucharistic Liturgy of Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption, in *A New Zealand Prayerbook* (The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia, 1988), 465.; <http://anglicanprayerbook.nz/456.html>.

²⁸ Farley, “The Meaning of Commitment,” 155.

²⁹ Margaret Farley also explores an expansive notion of fruitfulness in *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 227-228, 290.

dramatically articulated not through biological gestation — the “be fruitful and multiply” enjoiner of Genesis 1:28 — but rather through adoption.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul declares: “[Y]ou have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:15b-17). Like the cry of a newborn, that distinctive parental exclamation — “Abba!” — signals a spiritual birth, a freshly forged, newly fruitful familiarity. In the same letter, this transformative kinship is imaged as an engrafting: Gentile followers of Jesus could understand themselves as “wild olive branches ... engrafted contrary to nature [*para phusin enekentristhes*] into a cultivated olive tree” (Romans 11:24). Fruitfulness, for Christians, emerges through a creation that has been made new. We are not to be conformed to this world, Paul urges one chapter later, but rather “transformed by the renewing of our minds [*metamorphousthe te anakainosei*]” (Romans 12:2). 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.

A gift of the Holy Spirit, fruitfulness is the result of the cleansing from sin and reconciliation to God gifted to us in baptism, the ongoing outgrowth of the lifelong process of conversion. Through its baptismal foundation, the vocation of Christian marriage can lead us deeper into the heart of the Paschal Mystery itself. “In [baptism] we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit” (1979 BCP, 306). Once launched, that rebirth reverberates throughout our lives. “God gives the growth,” Paul explains to the community at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). As the letter to the Ephesians further urges: “[W]e must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

As individual members of this body, Christians continually rediscover and live into the new humanity inaugurated in Christ. This humanity, referenced earlier, emerges from the dissolution of the walls that divide us from one another. It is pervaded by peace, grounded in the spirit of reconciliation that Christ bore into our midst (Ephesians 2:14-22). As we seek to live into the promises we make at our baptism (1979 BCP, 304-5), to embody this new humanity, to embrace the Paschal Mystery itself, we are caught up in the loving dynamic of a creation that in Christ, as Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-389) proclaimed, has been “rendered afresh.”³⁰ Indeed, our individual growth also prompts the larger communal body to mirror more comprehensively the glory of the One through whom all things were made. When we are called to bear fruit that will last, this is first and foremost what is meant.

As one disciplined means of engaging this lifelong vocation to loving growth, Christian marriage is caught up in this trajectory of transformation. Its potential fruitfulness is always bound up with this metamorphic quality. Indeed, the story of the wedding at Cana, frequently referenced as a sign of Christ’s support of Christian marriage and cited in the prologue to “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” is at its heart a sign of transformation (1979 BCP, 423). In marriage, the divine power with which Christ “turned water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana” has the lifelong capacity to “transform [our] lives and make glad [our] hearts.”³¹ In Christ, transformation itself is revealed as a crucial quality of creation’s givenness, the capacity for spiritual growth and fruitfulness. Rather than a sign of dissolution, transformation renders creation pregnant with untold possibility.

³⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 39, “On the Holy Lights”: “What happened? And what is the great Mystery that involves us? Natures are made anew; God becomes human; the one who ‘rides on the heaven of heavens in the sunrise’ of his own proper glory and splendor, is glorified in the sunset of our ordinariness and lowliness, and the Son of God allows himself to become and to be called Son of [Humanity],” in Brian E. Daley, trans., *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 134.

³¹ From the Epiphany blessing, *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2003), 24.

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.³² 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.

Shaped as all vocations are by the adoptive charism of baptism, parenthood is a particular form of the call to carry forward the gift of God’s active choice: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16). At its most basic level, bearing that fruit through the vocation of parenthood prompts us to grow more deeply into our membership in Christ’s body, to be agents of God’s reconciliation, participants in the graced building of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:18; 15:5; John 15:1-17). In various ways — for some, through marriage and for some, through parenthood, but for all through life-giving relationships with each other and with God — we are called to abide in that divine love, making known the fruit of Christ’s saving embrace (Matthew 7:16-20).

Conclusion: Eschatological Communion with God and One Another

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 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.

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³² Goldingay et al., “Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology,” 41.

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