

A Pastoral Teaching on Marriage

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Preface.

There is no doubt that in our time the Church's traditional doctrine of marriage is being reappraised. Cultural currents in the societies of the West are flowing in new directions, shaped by new ideas and situations. This is true not simply in regard to marriage but more broadly as well, as many well-known markers of our cultural life are being challenged.

Christian reflection on the wider culture cannot be simply reactive, taking up a defensive position in favor of what has been in the past. Christian assessment of developments in the culture must be more nuanced than this, mindful that God is at work everywhere, and that "the spirit blows where it chooses" (Jo. 3:8). The influence of the Gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection is felt more widely than simply within the boundaries of the Church, and the trace of its effects are found in many unlikely places.

The Church, however, possesses a culture of its own, one that has been formative of the wider culture yet which is still distinctive. The Church's own culture is formed by the Holy Scriptures, practiced in worship, reflected on and lived out in its community life. The Church has its own unique resources to deploy in responding to new ideas and situations. The members of the Church seek discernment in sifting the wheat from the chaff; in discerning in this cultural moment that which is faithful to our witness from that which is not.

A widely acknowledged phenomenon, advancing at different rates in different places in the West, is the diminishment of the Church's institutional life and its influence in the culture at large. It comes as no surprise that the Church's distinctive way of life, though still finding an echo in the larger culture, is increasingly seen as counter-cultural, running against the current, or as simply irrelevant. This too is part of the cultural moment in which we live.

Same-sex marriage challenges a central assumption of the traditional doctrine of marriage: that the partners are members of the opposite sex. The traditional teaching that the procreation of the partners is one of the purposes of marriage is grounded in this difference. Same-sex marriage, in its practice, offers its own reappraisal of the traditional doctrine, as an instance of a broader ferment about the meaning of marriage. It is not the only such reappraisal that is in view in our culture, but it is the chief such at present within the Church.

The following pastoral teaching will attempt to offer a theological account of the Church's traditional teaching on marriage to members of the Diocese of Tennessee. It is by no means a systematic account: better and more extensive accounts can be found elsewhere.¹ It will first take up

¹ The Anglican Theological Review, Vol.93.1, "Same-Sex Relationships and the Nature of Marriage: A Theological Colloquy" contains both "traditional" and "liberal" accounts of marriage. This work was commissioned by the Episcopal House of Bishops' Theology Committee. <http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/read/issue/48/>

the subject of the nature of marriage, as a creation ordinance and a sacramental rite. It will then consider the traditional three-fold “goods” or “ends” of marriage, drawing upon the Book of Common Prayer and St. Augustine’s standard account. It will then look at four Scriptural “moments”: the Genesis account; Jesus’ interpretation of that account and his teaching in the Gospel of Mark; then (together) St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians and the Revelation of John.

Though it is not a systematic account, it does attempt to show that this teaching is coherent and reasonable; able to be commended and worthy of being sustained by the pastors and teachers of the Church, and by the People of God as a whole. It attempts to speak positively rather than negatively, with respect for those who differ in their view. It commends the traditional teaching rather than offering criticism of alternatives. It does not attempt to say everything that should be said about marriage, but focuses on the most pressing issues at hand within the Church.

It is a time of reappraisal, but this context also requires the re-appropriation of the traditional doctrine, especially in regard to features in danger of being forgotten. In fact, receiving what has been handed over is a crucial part of thinking theologically about our present situation. Christians are not the powerless captives of their cultural moment. This pastoral teaching invites us to draw upon the resources we have received, with confidence and hope for the future.

The Nature and Purpose of Marriage.

Marriage exists at a crossroads between the order of creation and the order of redemption. It is not unique in this, as the entire sacramental order itself exists at the same juncture. Nature and grace, the material and the spiritual: this is the common currency of the sacraments and the sacramental rites of the Church. The sacraments are celebrated by the Church at this intersection until that time when all sacraments will cease. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself presides over the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist and the other sacramental rites by which the People of God commemorate the new life that has been won for us by his death and resurrection.

Understanding the continuity between what has been made in the beginning and what has been redeemed in Christ is a signature note of the mainstream tradition of Christianity. In this view, the order of creation is not a thing indifferent, mere raw material for God’s grace to work upon, nor should it be seen as an order to be overcome by grace. God has been at work and continues to be at work in creation, from the beginning to the very end. Christians have commonly seen grace as perfecting nature rather than overriding or eclipsing it. Created things are sanctified rather than replaced; sin alone is overcome by grace. There is continuity between the order of creation and the order of redemption, and an implied consonance between the creation and the new creation in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is continuity and resemblance between the things that God has made and that are remade in Christ.

However, in saying that marriage exists at a crossroads between the orders of creation and redemption, we are saying something more than we would say generically about any sacrament or sacramental rite of the Church. Anglican formularies typically describe marriage as one of the “commonly called Sacraments,” having no “visible sign or ceremony ordained of God” because they are not “ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel.” Instead, marriage is one of the “states of life allowed in the Scriptures” (The Articles of Religion, XXV). Marriage is “instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency” (1662 BCP). In other words, it exists before Christ’s death and

resurrection. It is a creation ordinance. As our Prayer Book puts it, “The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation” (1979 BCP, 423).

If marriage is a state of life “allowed for” in the Scriptures, we must not lose sight of its Gospel significance. It is “Holy Matrimony” (423) or a “holy union” (424). It has ascetical purpose as a means of sanctification. It is a school of charity in which forgiveness and sacrifice are learned through love. It is the means by which Christian faith is passed on to the next generation. Jesus Christ himself “adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee” (423). Holy Matrimony also has sacramental significance, where the consonance and resemblance between what has been created and what is to be redeemed is clear. “It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church” (423). Marriage is a sign of the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

As a creation order with its own dignity, particular attention should be paid in Christian marriage to the continuity between the orders of creation and redemption. In marriage, the things that God has made come to reveal their greater significance in the economy of salvation. Men and women, parents and children, household and community, love and relationship itself: here in Holy Matrimony the building blocks of human life are taken up and sanctified by Christ Jesus himself and are made truly significant, as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace” (857).

The Goods of Marriage.

Christians have described the nature and purpose of marriage in various ways, but there has been remarkable unanimity that it includes among its purposes, “ends,” or “goods,” both procreative and unitive aspects. The Exhortation at the beginning of the liturgy of marriage describes these purposes:

Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored among all people. The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God (423).

This description of the goods of marriage has its origin in the classic account offered by St. Augustine (354-430), appropriated by the Western Medieval Church in the years afterward, and then mediated through the 16th century Reformation and 17th century Puritan re-emphasis on the dignity of marriage and of love and sexuality within this state of life.

As formulated by Augustine, these purposes of marriage were the goods of offspring, fidelity, and the bond or “sacrament” of marriage.² For Augustine, procreation referred to the bodily union of husband and wife that resulted in the birth of children; fidelity concerned the faithfulness of the couple to each other; and sacrament spoke of the permanence of the bond between them: both unitive aspects. Augustine also connected this bond between husband and wife, this “small sacrament,” to another sacrament, a “great sacrament” of the relationship of Christ and the Church.³ Here Augustine was following up on the resemblance and correspondence between the two suggested by St. Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians, a passage also noted in the Exhortation.

Modern accounts, though building upon Augustine’s formulation, sometimes speak of two purposes of marriage rather than three. For instance, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) Agreed Statement, *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church* (1994), speaks of the “two basic ‘goods’ of marriage, loving union and procreation,” and of “the reciprocal love of husband and wife, and the procreation and raising of children” as being among the “‘goods’” of marriage.⁴ Yet even here the unitive and procreative goods are displayed.

For Augustine, procreation was a good of marriage but not the only purpose; it existed in relation to the other purposes. Assuming that Mary and Joseph neither had sexual relations nor children together, Augustine argued that theirs was still a true marriage.⁵ The fact that he discussed the question in the controversy with the Manichean heretics (who typically argued that the material world was evil, and had little regard for the marriages that perpetuated human life) indicates it was a point in dispute; yet Augustine’s response may be taken to have settled the question as to whether the procreation of children was necessary to a marriage. As the Exhortation suggests, picking up on this insight, procreation in any particular marriage is a matter of God’s will, yet it cannot be excluded from the purposes or definition of marriage.

In the course of his work as a preacher and teacher, Augustine also took up and then discarded a primarily spiritual interpretation of the creation story that would have made its main reference not to the material world and to humanity, but to spiritual truths. For instance, the first of Augustine’s treatments of the Genesis account of creation equated the “be fruitful and multiply” as a command to bring forth “spiritual offspring of immortal and intelligible joy.”⁶ In this interpretation, the procreative command is subsumed under a broader value of generativity.

Augustine’s insight, developed over time, was that the Genesis account could not be interpreted solely in this way without doing violence to the meaning of the story. Its primary reference was to creation itself: to the world and to humanity. It was not meant to be simply an allegory of “higher

² On the Good of Marriage, 24.32.

³ On Marriage and Concupiscence, 1.21.23.

⁴ *Life in Christ*, sec. 60.

[https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105236/ARCIC II Life in Christ Morals Communion and the Church.pdf](https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105236/ARCIC%20II%20Life%20in%20Christ%20Morals%20Communion%20and%20the%20Church.pdf)

⁵ Against Faustus the Manichee, 23.8.

⁶ On Genesis against the Manichees, I.19.30.

truths.” Augustine continued to employ the spiritual interpretation of Holy Scripture, with its long tradition in Christianity, as a means to uncovering additional truths in the text. Yet when it came to the interpretation of the Genesis account, the primary reference in the story was to the world and humanity, to the relationship of actual men and women.⁷

The Genesis Account.

The Genesis account of creation contains two primeval stories, both of which bear on the nature of humanity and on marriage itself. These stories are communal in that they have been shaped over time and in different contexts by many tellers. Though the stories predate the modern categories of science, Christians believe the Genesis account is a faithful reflection of God’s purpose in creation.

The first chapter of Genesis tells the story of creation from a universal perspective that attempts to account for the creation of all things, laid out in a systematic fashion from the foundation of the cosmos through the emergence of the earth and its flora and fauna. Human beings, according to the first chapter of Genesis, are created at the end of God’s work as “male and female” (Gen. 1:27) and commanded to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). This command is accompanied by the blessing of God.

In the second chapter of Genesis a second story is found, less universal in its scope and systematic in its treatment, with a homely setting in a garden, concerning a creature who tills the soil. In this story the man is created first; and since “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18), and after no helper and partner was found for him among the animals, the woman is created from the side of the man. “The man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:23-24).

The two stories of the creation of humanity both point toward sexual difference as a primary artefact of the work of God in creation. In the first chapter, the good of procreation is seen as part of God’s blessing in creating humanity as male and female. Procreation is mentioned in the same breath as sexual difference. The second chapter emphasizes the unitive purpose of God in creating men and women from the same material, one from the side of the other; it also emphasizes the new community (“one flesh”) that is created by the couple as the man departs from the family into which he was born and creates with his wife a new community. From the beginning, the partnership of men and women was essential to human flourishing and to human community.

This account of the creation of humanity precedes the primeval account of humanity’s expulsion from the garden, contained in the third chapter. As a result of human disobedience evil enters the world. The creation order is damaged, including human relationships, with a consequent effect on childbearing and work itself. The first murder follows in the fourth chapter. Societies form; are disrupted; become ambitious (as at Babel) and are humbled. Yet the goods of sexual difference, the succession of generations, household and community, love and relationship, remain. God does not withdraw the blessing.

⁷ On the Literal Meaning of Genesis 3.22.34.

There are, of course, many different kinds of community; many states of life and many goods of human relationship. This fact does not necessarily undercut the foundational nature of that relationship on which all community and human life itself depends: the partnership of the two who act as father and mother to the next generation. In the time since the first couple, we all have a biological father and a mother: at least until that time when scientific technique overcomes this “limitation” and provides other options that will radically redefine what it means to be human.

Obscured by the increasing capacity of scientific technique and our ambition as human beings, marred by sin that casts a shadow over the actual experience of parenthood and childhood, and challenged by the different circumstances in which human beings find themselves: the succession of generations founded on sexual difference is undeniable. It is an additional modest claim that the fundamental equation of father and mother has a significant and foundational role in the existence of every community of persons and all human relationship itself. It is the foundation of every social bond that flows from it. Human society and all culture depends upon it. Given the insight of the Genesis account, fathers and mothers have an additional vocation toward the relationship of marriage.

In the light of this account and the two primary stories that it contains, it is clear at the very least that the difference between the sexes was a part of the hardy vernacular of life at the time these two stories were told and codified. This difference was linked in these communal stories to both procreation and to the formation of community through marriage. This perspective, of the relationship between sexual difference, procreation, and community, has been broadly shared in cultures in diverse places and throughout history. Of course, Christian faith sees it as more than a human construct, or even an order that should be overcome on account of its limitations, but as the providential ordering of human life implicit in the created order.

Jesus’ Teaching.

In the Gospel of Mark, Our Lord Jesus Christ draws upon both the first and second chapters of Genesis to teach about the nature of marriage.⁸ The question posed by the Pharisees in Mark is about divorce, but Jesus’ answer makes revealing assumptions about marriage itself and also contains teaching with implications for marriage as a whole.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate (Mk 10:2-9).

In response to the question, Jesus first asks about the teaching of the Law of Moses, which allowed a man to divorce his wife, providing for her the certificate that would allow for her to marry again.

⁸ Also Matthew 19:1-9.

Then he subordinates this teaching to a more fundamental law that goes back to the beginning of creation.

Jesus goes initially to the first chapter of Genesis (“God made them male and female”) with its reference to the sexual difference between the two, and then to the second chapter, with its longer citation of the unitive purposes of marriage, and the “one flesh” community created by the two in the new household.

Jesus appeals to the creation order that predates both human disobedience and the giving of the Law. In other words, marriage is intended by God as a lifelong partnership between two people: lifelong, because of the unitive purposes of God; and between two people as a function of the creation of two sexes. Jesus’ teaching assumes that we practice the marriage of *two* persons because *two* sexes have been created. Each of us has one partner because there is one “other” sex according to the creation account. The two become one flesh, and therefore may not be separated.

This is why marriage ought not to be broken; why a multiplicity of marriage partners ought not to be sought, even sequentially. Jesus’ teaching is in response to divorce, but it is readily applicable to polygamous marriage as well, though polygamy was not practiced in the culture of Jesus’ day. Absent the creation of two sexes and the appeal to the creation order for the single marriage of the two, this key component of Jesus’ argument against divorce disappears. Absent the logic of the two sexes, determinative of the “couple,” then “coupling” itself is subject to redefinition.

It may be argued that Jesus’ emphasis here is solely on the unitive purposes of marriage; on God’s will that a couple remain together as a sign of fidelity. Jesus’ interpretation, with the citation of the second chapter of Genesis certainly does emphasize the unitive aspect, but Jesus begins with the creation of humanity “male and female.” The language of “couple” is here revealing. This language, as it does in Jesus’ account, always leads us back to the first couple of the Genesis account, to the story of Adam and Eve that stands at the head of every consideration of “coupling,” and the partnership of men and women that is formative of society and all culture itself.

St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians and the Revelation of John the Divine.

The rest of the New Testament also offers us a view as to the theological weight that marriage might carry within the community of the Church. First of all, marriage figures in the appeal to husbands and wives in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians. The Apostle’s teaching (whether St. Paul himself or a later disciple) has a primary reference to marriage, and to the partnership of the couple within the web of relationships that exist in the Church. “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21) provides the overarching theme. Yet it also functions as an extended meditation both on the relationship of husband and wife, and on the relationship of Christ and the Church.

The Apostle does not set out to instruct his readers in a systematic way on marriage or to present to us even a preliminary sketch of a more developed doctrine of the Church as Head and Body. His appeal does not necessarily imply that the marriage relationship is determinative of our understanding of the Church, or (reversing the order) that the relationship between Christ and the Church determines the relationship of the couple. The teaching is occasional and unsystematic, but not without import for our understanding of both marriage and the Church.

What is suggested, at the very least, is a consonance and resemblance between marriage and the relationship of Christ to his Church, which allows the Apostle to speak of the one in terms of the other. The marriage of the couple has ecclesial significance, not only as a state of life practiced in the Church but as a relationship that reveals something of the union of the Head and the Body. Again, reversing the order, something of the relationship of Christ and the Church is caught and reflected in the union of the bridegroom and the bride.

The appeal concludes with a citation of the second chapter of Genesis, one that also appears in Jesus' teaching in Mark, and an explicit correlation. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31-32). Here the great mystery refers to human marriage, or to the Genesis text itself that speaks of marriage, which applies to the relationship between Christ and his Church. What is applied here is fitting; it corresponds; it resonates.

The vision of John the Divine in the Book of Revelation gives us a final concluding image, also pointing toward resemblance and correspondence. John first uses nuptial imagery in the nineteenth chapter of Revelation. "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready'... And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb'" (Rev. 19:9). In the vision, the Lamb is Christ, the one who is coming, and the bride is the suffering Church, now prepared and ready for the feast.

The vision is renewed in the twenty-first chapter.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away' (Rev. 21:1-4).

The holy city comes from God, adorned as a bride, ready for the wedding supper of the Lamb.

In the resurrection, as Jesus teaches, "they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matt. 22:30), but John's nuptial image of the bridegroom and the bride speaks of the life of the world to come. At the end of the Holy Scriptures, the story of Adam and Eve continues to echo as Christ the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) is united with his Body the Church. The primeval story of the garden undergirds John's vision of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city. This is the city that the wanderer Abraham looked forward to, the city "whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

"See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5), as the vision continues: new, in that the garden has become a city, but not one like Babel (Gen. 11) that is discontinuous with the garden. Within the well-watered city stands the tree of life itself (Rev.22:2). Here in the city of the saints, men and women, parents and children, the succession of the generations, find their place; household and community, love and relationship also find their fulfillment. Sacraments, those means of grace that

both resemble and signify, cease in the face of the greater reality. The blessing given at first is not abolished, but taken up completely and transformed entirely.

Conclusion.

This is undoubtedly a time of reappraisal of the Church's traditional doctrine of marriage, but also a time for re-affirmation. Our cultural moment is fraught with new possibilities, both creative and destructive. Christian reflection seeks discernment capable of telling one from the other.

This pastoral teaching has taken the Holy Scriptures as its primary resource. It acknowledges the reality of cultural change. It seeks guidance from a wider tradition of Christian reflection on the resources available to us. It attempts to speak positively of the things handed down, and not negatively about things now coming into view. People of good will may differ in their understanding of these matters. This account has spoken mainly of the features of the traditional doctrine that are most at issue now within the Church.

It has not attempted to say everything that could be said about marriage. It has left to one side other alternatives being explored by our culture, which are likely to have profound consequences on society, especially the eclipse of marriage itself by more informal social relationships. It has noted only in passing the impact of scientific technique, both in the present and in a possible future, on the practice of marriage and procreation. It has not taken up challenges to the reality of sexual difference itself.

This pastoral teaching is offered in a spirit of charity, to all people of good will who seek to reflect on these matters. It attempts to be reasonable and coherent in its discernment. It is also informed by confidence and hope, having the long view that we must have until the consummation of all things. "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).