

Another Look at Augustine on Marriage: An Historian's Response to "Marriage in Creation and Covenant"

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In Resolution A050 of the 77th General Convention, the Task Force on the Study of Marriage was commissioned to include in its work a study of the history of marriage, along with biblical, theological, liturgical, and canonical dimensions. In "Marriage in Creation and Covenant" (MCC), John Bauerschmidt, Zachary Guiliano, Wesley Hill, and Jordan Hylden make the key critique that the Task Force study lacks engagement with the broad Christian teaching tradition concerning marriage. In particular, they criticize the study because it does not meaningfully consider the goods of marriage as defined by Augustine of faithful union, offspring, and a sacramental bond. They find fault with the Task Force study for offering in its historical essay a primarily social and cultural historical approach to Christian marriage that leaves the impression that since marriage has had many permutations and understandings over the centuries, so now marriage can be understood afresh today in a manner that supports same-sex marriage.

While I am deeply supportive of marriage equality in both civil and ecclesiastical spheres, I have to concur with the critics that this section of the report is disappointing. I compare the historical essay with the first essay of the Task Force report on biblical and theological dimensions that offers an assessment of key sources and works toward providing a warrant for endorsing an Episcopal Church rite of same-sex marriage. In an Anglican hermeneutic, historical study is understood to include also an assessment of the tradition of Christian teachings about a given topic. I read the historical essay of the Task Force study hoping for such an analysis. While there is some discussion of key theologians, the treatment is too cursory in favor of the aforementioned historiography. While a valid approach, it is not the most useful one in isolation for this teaching document.

The absence of a sustained treatment of Augustine's theology of marriage—instead a functionalist view of his three goods of marriage is briefly considered—is a focal point for the MCC authors' critique of the Task Force report. This absence in the Task Force report is unfortunate because there is no escaping that Augustine has shaped most Western Christian theologies of marriage. If the meaning of Christian marriage is going to be expanded to include those in non-heterosexual relationships, then any historical study in support of it must provide more sustained engagement with the Western Augustinian perspective from which Anglicanism

emerges. One finds the Augustinian definition of marriage in documents from formative Anglicanism such as the Elizabethan *Book of Homilies* and Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*.¹ If an Anglican theological hermeneutic truly comprises scripture, reason, and tradition, then not only do supporters of same-sex marriage rites need to articulate how scripture is congruent to this practice, but also how the content of the Christian tradition can be read in an affirmative way concerning it.

Augustine on Marriage: Another View

The authors of MCC offer a defense of traditional marriage by reference to two key sources: the nuptial metaphor of Ephesians 5:32 and Augustine's understanding of the three goods of marriage. While the authors' critique has a compelling rhetorical dimension to it, it need not be the final word on either Augustine on marriage nor the central interpretation of Ephesians 5:32. I believe that the Task Force study ably offers a reading of Ephesians 5:32. I will offer another mode of approaching same-sex marriage via an Augustinian perspective.

In MCC, the authors' presentation of Augustine on marriage, while correctly noting the central place of his three goods of marriage in the Western tradition, more or less hews closely to Ephraim Radner's interpretation of Augustine. The question that the authors do not address is how Augustine's theology of marriage ought to be received today and if Radner's interpretation need be the only possible lens for its application. One aspect of this treatment is a lack of context for Augustine's marital theology. In both of his commentaries on Genesis (*On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* and *On Genesis Against the Manichees*) and in his treatises concerning marriage (*On the Good of Marriage* and *On Marriage and Concupiscence*) Augustine seeks to defend the Christian practice of marriage against the anti-materialism of the Manicheans on the one hand and the rigorist asceticism of Jerome and his circle on the other. Augustine positively establishes that sexuality is intrinsic to human nature. Yet, for Augustine the problem of uncontrolled sexual desire serves as the synecdoche for the problem of the post-lapsarian human will. Thus, while Augustine affirms that marriage can serve as a good, expressed in terms of fidelity, procreation, and the sacramental bond, he also affirms that celibacy remains the highest ideal for the Christian life.²

The authors of MCC rest most of their argument against a positive theology of same-sex marriage on the Augustinian good of procreation in marriage and the perceived deficiency in same-sex marriage concerning the absence of procreation. There is no debate that procreation is a primary good of marriage, and nothing in the Task Force study would contradict this. But the question stands whether the intent of procreation, if not its fruit, must be present in all marriages.

¹ "An Homily of the State of Matrimony," *Certain Sermons, or Homilies, Appointed to be Read in Churches, in the Time of the Late Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory* (London: The Prayer-Book and Homily Society, 1852), 468; Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V. 73.

² Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage* 9.9; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 399–400.

This is a serious issue and one that must be addressed outside of the late antique context in which Augustine wrote. The Augustinian tradition must be interpreted for this era.

Augustine can be read in two ways regarding the necessity of procreation in marriage. One approach locates procreation as a functional necessity for the people of the earth and a curb against lustful desire. In his literal commentary on Genesis, Augustine indicates that Eve was created solely for the purpose of the procreation of humanity; otherwise would not God have given Adam another man as a companion?³ In this view, women exist in a functional role in human society—for the purpose of childbearing—while men are the organizers of society. In this reading of Augustine, marriage, while a good for the development of society, is of a lesser order than chastity and the ascetic life of celibacy. It serves as a guard against sins such as fornication while also serving as a concession to concupiscence, the sexual drive that is the sign of a disordered will to Augustine.⁴

A second approach would emphasize the social and relational dimensions of marriage. Augustine attests that, apart from the three goods of marriage, the state of matrimony is a fundamentally social good of which childbearing is one, but not the exclusive, part. Thus *On the Good of Marriage* begins:

Forasmuch as each man is a part of the human race, and human nature is something social, and hath for a great and natural good, the power also of friendship; on this account God willed to create all men out of one, in order that they might be held in their society not only by likeness of kind, but also by bond of kindred. Therefore the first natural bond of human society is man and wife.⁵

Certainly the begetting of children is the means by which Augustine's vision of a unified human society is created. Yet procreation is not an end in itself, but leads to the goal of fellowship and friendship. Indeed, Augustine argues that Adam chose to eat from the forbidden fruit not because he was beguiled by Eve but rather because he chose not to abandon her out of an abiding sense of friendship.⁶ Marriage is a good that supports God's will for a social order informed by charity and fidelity.

From this second perspective, marriage does not exist simply as a means for controlling human lust and ensuring the human race survives (as a more pessimistic reading of Augustine might lead) but provides the means for creating a lifelong covenant (*sacramentum*) both for reproduction of the species and for the joy of fellowship among two people. Indeed, this dimension of marriage is a strand in Anglican views on marriage. In the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, Cranmer offers a classical stance concerning marriage, citing it as a sign of the union between Christ and his church, for the purpose of begetting Christian children, and to protect

³ Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* IX.5.9 (commenting on Genesis 2:18–24).

⁴ Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, I.16.16.

⁵ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage* 1.1, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, 3.399.

⁶ Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* XI.42.60.

against fornication. But he also declares, following emerging Protestant theologies of marriage, that marriage also exists “for the mutall societie, helpe, and comfort, the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperitie and adversitie.”⁷ The 1979 Episcopal rite retains similar language in its opening words. These elements of Anglican marriage rites indicate that this Augustinian strand of friendship, fidelity, and relationality in the marriage covenant exists along with procreation as a goal of marriage.

Applying Augustine and Scriptural Witness to Contemporary Christian Family Life

This alternate reading of Augustine on marriage returns us to the fundamental issue that the critics of the Task Force study do not address: what about heterosexual marriages that do not result in children? Do these meet the standard of a theologically sound marriage? This issue is important because of the way in which MCC presents the three goods of marriage as a seamless and necessary whole. There is no teaching in Anglicanism to suggest that marriages that do not produce children are deficient. Indeed, the 1979 prayer book rite specifically states that marriage results in the procreation of children “when it is God’s will” (BCP 423). Marriage can exist for purposes other than procreation and still possess the goods of fidelity and a sacramental bond for heterosexual couples. This opens a way for understanding same-sex marriage on an Augustinian ground. If we understand marriage as a model not only of procreation but also fidelity that models social concord, and we admit that one of these goods may exist without the others, we can imagine same-sex marriages existing in this model similar to how non-procreative heterosexual marriages might exist.

The authors of MCC argue that Ephraim Radner’s theology of marriage is the most satisfactory one because heterosexual couples clearly imitate a Christ-centered life: “Through the pain of childbirth and toil of childrearing, they give themselves away in a shared love that passes along God’s gift of life” (MCC 16).⁸ This certainly is a compelling statement; but it need not exclude same-sex marriage. First is the obvious point that it is possible for lesbian couples to bear children through in-vitro fertilization. Once that is accomplished, does not the above sentence also apply to them? This is not a technicality but a lived reality in many Episcopal parishes today. Second, what of any couple that adopts a child, regardless of sexual orientation? Do they not give themselves up, if not in childbirth, then in the “toil of childrearing”? Again, this is not a hypothetical scenario but a lived reality among many of the faithful in the Episcopal Church.

The question of adoption is also important in the context of procreation as a good of marriage because of its deep theological meaning in Christianity. All Christians are members of the people of God by virtue of adoption into God’s household. God “destined us for adoption as

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 64, 712.

⁸ Here the critics draw on Ephraim Radner, “Same-Sex Marriage is Still Wrong; And It’s Getting Wronger Every Day,” Anglican Communion Institute, July 17, 2013; www.anglicancommunioninstitute.com/2013/07/same-sex-marriage-is-still-wrong-and-its-getting-wronger-every-day/.

his children” (Eph. 1:4). Paul declares to the Galatians that they have been made heirs of the Abrahamic covenant by a process of adoption through Christ’s redemption (Gal. 3:23–4:5). It is this adoption as children of God in Christ by the Spirit that allows us to call God “Father” (Rom. 8:14–17). The authors of MCC state that heterosexual marriage is the “embodied sign of the lasting union between Christ and his Church” (MCC 12). And yet, we have three extended Pauline witnesses to adoption as another familial sign of the abiding union of Christians with the Triune God. Clearly, family metaphors are a key source of theological understanding of the relationship between the church, its members, and the Triune God. Christ is the key to entry into the household of God. Indeed, we can view the rite of baptism as a process of adoption in the household of God.⁹ The rite of marriage creates families, both biological and adoptive. The children of marriage, whether by birth or adoption, are equally the good fruit of a marriage. And so, adoptive families, whether gay or straight, can be encompassed in these biblical metaphors of family.

We also can return again to non-procreative families, both same-sex and heterosexual. They do not engage in the pain and toil of bearing and raising children. Yet, do not two people in a lifelong, but childless, relationship also engage in self-giving love that also models the sacrificial love of Christ? As the authors of the Task Force report note in essay one, a marriage of kenotic, self-giving charity is an ideal for all marriages. When that self-giving charity is exhibited, this shows forth the sacramental mystery of marriage representing the union of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32), regardless of the presence of children.¹⁰ The Christian marriage that does not result in children is not some sort of self-absorption or denial of the goods of this world, as the critics suggest when they cite Robert Song’s *Covenant and Calling*. The self-giving in marriage is a great good, with or without children. As Christ said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). While most of us will not have occasion to die for our friends, there is a daily asceticism, a dying to self, that Christian marriage requires of both partners. And this self-sacrifice may be exercised in both same-sex and heterosexual marriages, with or without the presence of children.

There is no doubt that the Episcopal Church is doing something new regarding marriage. Can this new understanding of marriage be articulated in a way that comprehends the wider Christian tradition concerning marriage? To cite traditional teachings on marriage is not enough in our cultural context. The church also needs to interpret these teachings. This essay has sought to show that it is possible within an Augustinian framework to present a positive theology of same-sex marriage that also speaks to contemporary realities of heterosexual marriage.

Finally, the authors of this critique of the Task Force report request that any future task force on marriage be comprised of more diverse theological membership concerning views of marriage. I support this request. If as Anglicans we truly value the concept of comprehensiveness

⁹ “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood” (BCP, 308).

¹⁰ Task Force on the Study of Marriage, *Report to the 78th General Convention*, 18–21.

and the need for containing in one body those of differing views, any future task force must have a more diverse membership. Unity amid difference must be a hallmark of the Episcopal Church: it is authentic to our origins as a church and it is part of our path forward that must focus on our mission of proclaiming the gospel to the world.