

A Rejoinder to “Marriage in Creation and Covenant”

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Following Karl Barth and many other Christian theologians over the centuries (myself included) who affirm the world’s creation in and for Christ, the authors argue that marriage as a created good should also be so ordered. Unfortunately, the way they develop the latter claim about marriage—to stress the importance of the intent by husband and wife to procreate through sexual activity—comports well with neither scripture, tradition, nor reason. I’ll attempt to show this with reference to the particular scriptural and traditional sources the authors themselves cite: those sources cannot in any obvious way be aligned with the authors’ views about the primary importance of procreation to marriage (via specifically heterosexual sexual activity on the part of the couple).¹

By virtue of having been entered into for the sake of procreation, the authors argue, marriage becomes a sacramental participation, here and now, in Christ’s relation to the church. This is, I take it, an accurate summary of their own most basic view. In order to support its purported sacramental character, the authors therefore need to show how the procreative relationship between a man and woman in marriage corresponds to Christ’s relationship with the church. But this is easier said than done, and hasn’t much precedent in scripture or tradition—for good reason.

The Christ/church relationship has of course often been used in Christian theology to talk about the relationship between husbands and wives; Ephesians 5 is a prominent biblical precedent which the authors routinely cite. The correspondence between the two relationships is usually established, however, simply with reference to the character of their respective loving bonds: Christ loves the church as a husband is to love his wife (and vice versa). Procreation within marriage is difficult to discuss in these same terms and is probably for this reason not mentioned in these verses of Ephesians, nor elsewhere that I know of in the New Testament, nor even very much in the history of Christian theology, when married relations between men and women are discussed in terms of the relationship between Christ and the church: Christ may give

¹ The authors themselves do not make a very clear distinction between the intention to have and raise children in getting married and the intention to engage in procreative sexual activity. A man and woman can obviously intend the former without intending the latter; one might, for example, get married with the intent of adopting children while forgoing procreative sexual activity altogether.

birth to the church out of love for it but husbands do not give birth to their wives by loving them; husbands' loving relationships with their wives may be generative of children but Christ's loving relationship with the church is not generative of anything else—the church just *is* what Christ's love generates—and so on.

Perhaps to get around this problem, the authors innovate: they associate the male–female procreative bond as a whole with Christ and their offspring with the church. I'm eager for enlightenment at this point, but I know of no scriptural passage or theological precedent that uses nuptial imagery with this assignment of roles, nor do the authors offer any. For one, it would mean putting women, along with men, on the Christ side of the relationship with the church rather than on the church side (where the couple's children now are), thereby contravening the usual assumed gender hierarchy undergirding traditional Christian uses of nuptial imagery. Women on the Christ side might well support, for example, women's capacity, with men, to represent Christ at the altar by virtue of their gender.

Yes, as Augustine (the authors' favorite authority) affirms, physical procreation of children can be ordered to the spiritual procreation that makes human beings the adopted children of God through Christ. Physical procreation might in that way be loosely associated with Christ's own 'procreative' powers. But the character of those respective procreative activities are not at all analogous. What Christ does to enable our new birth as God's children is nothing like heterosexual intercourse and therefore can provide no ready models for procreative sexual activity in marriage. Christ has some female consort in his generation of the church? His own mother is likely to come to mind but the problems with that imagery as a model for procreation in marriage are (one would hope) too obvious to mention.

Perhaps in part out of respect for this lack of any direct correspondence, Augustine typically maintains a means/ends connection between the two: entering into marriage for the sake of procreation is a good thing for Christians to do insofar as such a marriage can be ordered to the higher good of the spiritual procreation of the church by Christ.² In other words, the two procreative relationships are ordered to one another in that people need to be born before they can be reborn. But at this point in time, as Augustine notes, the earth is already well populated and one would therefore be hard pressed to justify the good of any particular marriage simply on those religious grounds.³ There are already quite enough people around to make up the predestined number of the saints. Christian couples are therefore under no obligation, they have no religious duty (as the Old Testament patriarchs had), to enter into a procreative marriage to ensure the future wellbeing of the church (in the patriarchs' case by establishing the people from whom Christ would come).

Even the purely natural goods of procreation within marriage can now be left behind for much the same reason. Procreative sexual activity within marriage is hardly for Augustine a

² See "On Marriage and Concupiscence," Book I, Chapters 5 and 9. Chapter numbers follow *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* edition, vol. 5.

³ "On Marriage and Concupiscence," Chapters 14–19.

good in itself; it is good as the necessary means to a further good: the human fellowship of society that children make possible.⁴ But, running contrary to such natural stakes of procreative activity when the earth was unpopulated, God’s command to be fruitful and multiply has at this point been more than fulfilled by the good works of preceding generations. The end of social fellowship, which God intended by creating human beings as social creatures, does not, in short, require people now to have more children; married couples are presently “under no obligation from duty to human society” to procreate.⁵ That human fellowship would eventually die out along with the human race were no more children to be born is not, while true in principle, an especially Christian worry: Christians simply await what they hope will be the speedy end of this now quite well populated earthly city.⁶

That Christians are engaging in procreative sex within marriage to serve a religious end now becomes, indeed, an all too easy cover-up for the sin that ever accompanies such sexual activity short of the eschaton: simple sensual gratification of the body’s rebellious members. Even when practiced by the best intentioned of Christian couples, the sexual activity necessary for procreation remains quite worrisome to Augustine—tainted by sin. Those acts are invariably, after the fall and before resurrected life, infected with some degree of lust; more specifically, those procreative acts can never be totally, from their initiation in male erection through consummation in male climax, under the complete control of a Christ-oriented will.⁷

Rather than hiding behind a religious command to procreate, which has now become obsolete, Christians who intend to engage in procreative sex while married should simply admit in all honesty, then, that they are entering into marriage because they cannot otherwise restrain themselves and be abstinent, as they ideally should be.⁸ Marriage remains a good for such Christians primarily as a way of disciplining the sexual activity that would, apart from marriage, otherwise rage in their lives.⁹ They can engage in sexual intercourse while married but only for procreative purposes—that is to be their discipline. Procreative sexual activity within marriage is a good for such Christians, then, not particularly because it is a means of producing children, but because it is a means of restraining lust. The good of marriage as an institution dedicated to procreation in this way turns what Christians should ideally be avoiding altogether—sexual intercourse—into something that is itself arguably good or at least no longer blameworthy. To the extent one engages in such activity not simply (or at all) for the sake of procreation but for the sake of sexual pleasure as well (which is to say always, now that the time for marrying out of piety and duty has passed?), the good of the institution of marriage makes such activity at least

⁴ See “On the Good of Marriage,” Chapter 9.

⁵ “On the Good of Marriage,” Chapter 15, following the translation in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10.

⁶ See “On the Good of Marriage,” Chapter 10. Augustine cites 1 Timothy 1:5 and 1 Corinthians 7.

⁷ See, for example, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” Chapters 7-9, and 27; and *City of God*, Book XIV, Chapter 19.

⁸ “On the Good of Marriage,” Chapters 9, 10, and 19.

⁹ “On the Good of Marriage,” Chapter 10; Augustine cites 1 Corinthians 7:9 here.

pardonable; it remains sinful but in a merely venial way, compared with the mortal sins of adultery or fornication that failed efforts at abstinence might well lead to.¹⁰

Better yet, then, if one entered into marriage with the intent of having procreative sex, to become at some point a celibate married couple. Having practiced the disciplining of their lust by engaging in intercourse only for the sake of procreation, the married couple might one day, Augustine hopes, be able to forgo procreative sexual activity too and abstain from sex altogether.¹¹ Despite their sin, Adam and Eve, in an otherwise unpopulated earth, properly set out as a married couple to follow, outside the garden, the injunction to be fruitful and multiply given to them within it (when they could have procreated without lust). But the natural and religious ends of the divine commands to them and their descendants having been realized, procreative sexual activity within marriage is now more problematic than before, and married couples should therefore work towards its eradication.

Mary and Joseph become the model here for what marriage should be like for Christians.¹² Mary and Joseph never had sex, according to Augustine. They obviously did marry with the intent of having a child (since Mary was already pregnant), and they did so quite rightly: in their case becoming parents was in service of the salvation of the human race (the authors would no doubt remind us here that Jesus had to be born before he could die!), and becoming the parents of Christ required no sinfully tarnished procreative sexual activity from them. Augustine cites scriptural passage after scriptural passage, indeed, to support both their parental claims absent procreative sex: Joseph is Jesus' father despite the so-to-speak 'artificial' means of Jesus' conception that bypassed the possibility of Joseph's contribution altogether.¹³ And what a good thing too, given the problematic character of sexual procreative activity! Here the goods of offspring, fidelity, and sacramental union coincide (miraculously) without the need for activity by bodily members not fully subject to God-oriented control. In the lives of everyone else, however, this lovely sort of 'coherence' among the goods of marriage, as Augustine well knows, is not to be expected.

Thus, under conditions of sin, in a fully populated world that has already seen Christ's coming, the intention to procreate can—indeed where possible should—be absent in marriage. The good of the institution of Christian marriage is not jeopardized thereby in any way—so long

¹⁰ "On the Good of Marriage," Chapters 6; see also Chapters 11, and 15.

¹¹ See *City of God*, Book XIV, Chapters 19 and 24.

¹² "On Marriage and Concupiscence," Chapters 12 and 13.

¹³ Ephraim Radner's assertion (in one of the several texts by him upon which the authors heavily depend) that gay parents are such only in name because their children are not produced by way of their own procreative sexual activity in marriage becomes truly flabbergasting when read in light of Augustine's interpretation here of Mary and Joseph. See his "Same-Sex Marriage Is Still Wrong; And It's Getting Wronger Every Day," www.anglicancommunioninstitute.com/2013/07/same-sex-marriage-is-still-wrong-and-its-getting-wronger-every-day/.

as the (now ideally celibate) couple remains faithfully united in love.¹⁴ Fidelity and the sacramental bond of marriage become in this way, one might say, the defining goods of marriage for Christians, over and against the good of procreation. Whatever marriage's usefulness as a means for controlling lust—Augustine is well aware how rare the restriction of sexual activity to the intent to procreate really is in married life—and however lessened the good of having children may be under current conditions, the institution of Christian marriage itself remains as good as ever, for Augustine, because of the fidelity and sacramental bond characteristic of it.

Indeed, the goods of faithfulness and of the sacramental bond routinely trump the good of procreation in marriage for Augustine, wherever they come into conflict. For example, infertility is never grounds for infidelity within marriage or for divorce, however good one's desire may be to produce more children for Christ—by marrying someone else or by sexual dalliances on the side.¹⁵ Presumably, the sacramental character of the marriage bond would trump both the other goods of marriage—*fides* and *proles*—in the same way. Even having an infertile and unfaithful spouse is insufficient cause for trying to break the sacramental bond of marriage by getting divorced. Resisting the suggestion of appropriate grounds for divorce in Matthew 19:9, Augustine maintains that, while the infidelity of one's spouse may properly bring the end of cohabitation (at least for a time), the bond of marriage remains inviolable and one is therefore never free to marry another while he or she is alive; doing so would be to commit adultery.¹⁶

Perhaps in order to blunt the force of this sort of subordination of the good of procreation to the other two goods of marriage, the authors attempt to blur the sacramental character of marriage with its procreative intent: procreation within marriage is itself sacramental, according to the authors. But this is simply not what Augustine says: it is specifically the bond of union—not the intention to procreate—that makes marriage sacramental; it is the bond of union in marriage that signifies and participates in Christ's unbreakable love for his church.¹⁷ Because it is not identified with procreation (or even closely associated with it, as in the case of faithfulness), this sacramental character of marriage remains even when their inability to produce children through sexual activity is well known to a married couple who nevertheless (out of weakness) continue to engage, fruitlessly, in sexual activity that, in principle but not for them, could be procreative.

The authors try to maintain, contrary to Augustine, that procreation has a sacramental character by associating the struggles of birth and child rearing in marriage with Christ's own suffering love that gave rise to the church. Marriage was apparently created by God for this very

¹⁴ "God forbid that the nuptial bond should be regarded as broken between those who have by mutual consent agreed to observe a perpetual abstinence from the use of carnal concupiscence," "On Marriage and Concupiscence," Chapter 12. See also "On the Good of Marriage," Chapter 3.

¹⁵ See "On Marriage and Concupiscence," Chapter 11.

¹⁶ "On the Good of Marriage," Chapter 7.

¹⁷ See the clear distinction among the three goods of marriage in "On Original Sin," Book II, Chapter 39, of "On the Grace of Christ and On Original Sin." Again, chapter numbers follow *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* edition, vol. 5.

purpose: to be, by way of its procreative character, the sacrament of God's own creative suffering love, as one sees that love come to fruition in Christ's suffering and death for the sake of his church.¹⁸ Besides being oddly (and in a quite self-congratulatory way I might add) negative about procreation—having children is really like sharing in Christ's crucifixion for these authors?—making marriage into a sacrament of suffering procreative love blurs the good of creation with sin in a disastrous way that one might think these authors—otherwise so scrupulous to distinguish creation, covenant, and consummation—would seek to avoid. The pain of childbirth, the difficulties and disappointments of raising children, the acceptance of mortality that the decision to have children perhaps represents for specifically Christian parents, the anxiety about one's children's future and wellbeing—all these 'crosses' are quite evidently, according to the concerted witness of scripture and tradition, the consequences of sin. Toil, mortality culminating in actual death, pain in childbirth, loss of physical integrity and decay, and so on, are not our created condition but results of the fall. Are we to assume that God wrote them, nonetheless, into the created good of marriage dedicated to procreation? Augustine hardly thinks so. Read his account—admittedly speculative, not to mention blushing prurient!—about what procreation would have been like for the married couple, Adam and Eve, if they'd had the chance to follow the injunction to be fruitful and multiple prior to their fall: no lust, no distress, no fear, no pain.¹⁹ While Christians will eventually enjoy a life together in heaven that exceeds the created goods of marriage—there is no marriage in heaven according to Matthew 22:29, Mark 12:25, and Luke 22:34–36—they are certainly called now to come closer to those created goods of marriage by struggling, in the ways the goods of marriage themselves afford, to overcome the sin that remains in their lives short of the eschaton. What this means—contrary to what the authors imply (with their smug, hypocritical suggestion that affluent people in the West have lost a proper recognition for the hardships of life)²⁰—is the struggle within marriage against the distress, fear, and pain of procreation—not their celebration!

Perhaps marriage as a sacrament of suffering creative love is the necessary result of considering the good of marriage in light of its creation in and for Christ? The authors suggest as much. But, once again, a simple focus on the loving bond of marriage is sufficient to show the way marriage as a created good is ordained by God in light of Christ: we are bound to one another in marriage as God is bound to us in Christ. The crucifixion need not make an appearance here.

Even Barth (the authors' other, albeit more recent, historical authority along with Augustine)—who went as far as possible in reading signs of Christ's crucifixion into the created order in order to demonstrate its creation in and for Christ—refused to go as far as the authors do here in their response. The Yes (of love and election) and the No (of sin's condemnation and

¹⁸ The authors follow Ephraim Radner here fairly closely.

¹⁹ See *City of God*, Book XIV, Chapters 10, 23, 24, and 26.

²⁰ "Marriage in Creation and Covenant," 17.

rejection) that typify the crucifixion may be, for Barth, the internal basis, that is, the reason for and deep meaning of, the separations and divisions found within creation—say, the separation in God’s creation of the world between water and earth or between darkness and light.²¹ But God did not create the world to be a world of death and suffering just because it was God’s will from all eternity (according to Barth) that Christ’s life take the shape of suffering and death to save us. While Barth was clear about the way married relations between men and women are reflective, prospectively, of the fulfillment of God’s loving covenant with the world in Christ, their suffering for the sake of their children therefore had nothing at all to do with it.²²

Did Christ come to overcome suffering and death on the cross, or does the Christ-directed character of creation sanctify the suffering and death currently found within it? That’s the most fundamental theological question raised, to my mind, by the authors’ effort to affirm the sacramental character of the suffering procreative love in marriage that they take to be a created good. The authors give us no compelling reason to say ‘yes’ to the latter half of the question. Whatever their other differences, Christian scripture and tradition, as I read them, line up uniformly on the side of a ‘yes’ to the former: Christ saves us from suffering rather than creating us for suffering’s sake.

²¹ See *Church Dogmatics*, 3/1.

²² This is in great part because Barth, along with the majority of the Christian tradition as I’ve suggested, sees little in procreation per se that reflects Christ’s relationship with the church. Barth in fact rather routinely sets what he views as the properly erotic character of the relationship between man and woman in Genesis 2 and the Song of Songs against the importance paid to progeny in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. While the latter might be appropriate he thinks for a people awaiting its anointed Son, it is no longer properly a preoccupation in male–female relationships once Christ has come, the importance of Genesis 2 and the Song of Songs for an understanding of the basic form of heterosexual relationships thereby regaining their proper primacy. See *Church Dogmatics* 3/1, pp. 288–329; and 3/2, pp. 285–324. The ‘sweetness,’ ‘intimacy,’ and ‘nearness’ of a married life without ‘caution’ or ‘care’ is what mirrors the love between Christ and his church, reflection of the crucifixion being reserved for Adam’s ‘sacrifice’ of himself in the bringing forth of Eve from his side while in a ‘mortal sleep.’ See *Church Dogmatics*, 3/1, pp. 315 and 321.