

Three Questions for the Authors of “Marriage in Creation and Covenant”

Scott MacDougall

*Visiting Assistant Professor of Theology
Church Divinity School of the Pacific
Berkeley, California*

In reply to “Marriage in Creation and Covenant” (MCC), the response by John Bauerschmidt, Zachary Guiliano, Wesley Hill, and Jordan Hylden to the report of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage, I wish to pose three interrelated questions. (1) Is the overall Augustinian framework of the authors’ position as definitive, stable, and necessary as they suggest? (2) Are the scriptural bases of the authors’ position convincing? And (3) Is it true that to affirm same-sex marriage is to advance a defective eschatology?

(1) Is the Augustinian framework of the authors’ position definitive, stable, and necessary?

The authors state they “find it fruitful to return to Augustine in an attempt to draw out the oft-forgotten theo-logic he bequeathed to the whole Church” (MCC 13). Such a project of retrieval generally repays the effort. What is problematic here, however, is that the authors present their Augustinian theology of marriage as the one definitive Christian theology of marriage. Their reading of Augustine is referred to as “the tradition” and Augustine is styled as the theologian “whose treatment of sexual ethics is paradigmatic” (MCC 12). Little room remains for taking seriously other streams of tradition or other paradigmatic ethics. One might, for example, look to the Eastern fathers and mothers, although MCC takes a dim view of this possibility (MCC 12–13, 16). Theologies of liberation or the rich contemplative tradition offer valuable approaches to sexual ethics. Philosophically, one could derive sexual ethics from theological readings of pragmatism or phenomenology. Within the Anglican tradition, theologians such as Richard Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, Joseph Butler, F. D. Maurice, and William Temple all provide paradigmatic and influential perspectives with deep ethical implications. None of this, of course, is to suggest that these theologians argue in favor of same-sex marriage or to deny that some of their views would be quite consonant with some of Augustine’s. It is only to question the narrowness of MCC’s scope in assigning paradigmatic status to the sexual ethics of only one Christian theologian.

Moreover, the authors do not acknowledge that identifying *the* Augustinian view on many theological issues is tricky, nor do they confront the thorny problem of the many,

sometimes contradictory, ways in which Augustine’s writings have been received.¹ They refer, for example, to “the Augustinian marriage tradition” without further ado, and proceed to call this “the Christian tradition’s understanding of marriage” (MCC 12, 18).

While there are definitely constants in Augustine’s nuptial theology, it seems clear to some scholars, albeit to varying degrees, that it shifted to a certain extent over time as well.² To offer one example, Augustine consistently maintained that marriage communicates three goods: *fides* (faith), *proles* (procreation³), and *sacramentum* (sacrament). MCC understands marriage’s *sacramentum* to be “an embodied sign of the lasting union between Christ and his Church” (MCC 12). It lies in its being an “icon” that ontologically participates in the Christ–church relationship (MCC 2, 3). Marriage is not a human, social practice graced and sanctified by God, evincing the quality of self-sacrificing, other-affirming love that Christ has for the church, as Anglican theologian Bruce Kaye, for instance, affirms.⁴ It is a divine institution woven into the fabric of creation from the beginning, deriving from the Christ–church covenant that itself is the outworking of the covenant between Creator and creation (MCC 15–17). Not only is the heady odor of Augustinian Neoplatonism quite pungent here,⁵ but this may not be what Augustine meant by *sacramentum*. Augustine seems to have construed marriage’s *sacramentum* in at least four ways in his work over time: “as image of the eschatological union of all people in Christ; as

¹ Particularly notable among the many volumes dedicated to tracing the streams of various readings of Augustine are Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2010); David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Karla Pollmann, ed., *Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also: Rodney L. Peterson, “Augustine: Growth in Grace and Understanding,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 53 (Spring/Winter 2008): 65–101.

² Elizabeth Clark, ed., *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996); Lisa Fullam, “Toward a Virtue Ethics of Marriage: Augustine and Aquinas on Friendship in Marriage,” *Theological Studies* 73.3 (September 2012): 663–692; David G. Hunter, “Marriage,” in Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 535–537; Willemien Otten, “Augustine on Marriage, Monasticism, and the Community of the Church,” *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 385–405, esp. 399–400.

³ I am not going to address the claim that marriage is for procreation since the Task Force report does a thorough job of this. I will, though, pause to observe that it is somewhat surprising that the authors have not noticed that many same-sex couples, married and unmarried, are blessed by children who have come into their lives through previous heterosexual relationships, adoption, surrogacy, artificial insemination, foster parenting, or other means. I note this not to agree that children are necessary for Christian marriage, but to express dismay at MCC’s rendering these families invisible.

⁴ Bruce N. Kaye, “‘One Flesh’ and Marriage,” *Colloquium* 22 (1990): 55.

⁵ Very roughly, Augustinian Neoplatonism is a metaphysical system that tends to espouse the existence of a hierarchy of being, with God at its apex and material reality at its base. Everything is assigned a proper place in a sequence of levels, based on the degree to which it participates in God, as the highest good. Everything—objects, ideas, acts—has a divinely fixed nature with which its existence and use must properly accord. The nature of marriage, for instance, is that it is the unification of a man and a woman as one flesh, a state through which the couple participates metaphysically in the higher good of the Christ–church covenant that is the source of the divine institution of marriage. Marriage of any other configuration would, on this account, be inherently disordered. An important question, of course, is whether Christians are required to subscribe to a metaphysical view that relies on essences in this way.

the hidden meaning that human marriage is taken up into the union of Christ and the Church; as the cause that brings about the effect of lifelong perseverance in marriage; as the bond that unites the spouses until death.” Given this, Kenneth Himes and James Coriden conclude, “It is not readily apparent what Augustine thought was marriage’s *sacramentum*.” Himes and Coriden state that later interpreters and the medieval canonists assigned to Augustine the *sacramentum* of marriage that the MCC authors are so certain is *the* Augustinian position. It is not Augustine’s own formulation.⁶

Are the MCC authors correct in claiming the existence of a single Christian tradition of marriage over against the Task Force’s review of historical Christian marriage customs? If one does exist, can it simply be equated with Augustine’s viewpoint? Even if it can be, have the authors identified *the* or only *an* Augustinian theology of marriage?

(2) *Are the scriptural bases of the authors’ position convincing?*

The biblical lynchpin of MCC’s argument is the authors’ interpretation of Ephesians 5:32 (MCC 2, 3, 12, 17). This verse appears in the context of an analogy that the letter’s writer (whom I will call Paul) makes, comparing the love between spouses to the love that Christ has for the church. In both cases, two formerly separate things have somehow become one. Laying aside here the vexed gender-related issues in the surrounding verses, I want to emphasize that, in verse 32, Paul is analogizing *from* the unitive love between spouses in marriage *to* the unitive love between Christ and his church: “This [the spousal love through which two people become one flesh] is a great mystery, *and I am applying it to* Christ and the church” (emphasis added).⁷

Against the plain sense of the text and scholarly exegesis, MCC inverts the direction of the analogy, starting with a claim about the Christ–church relationship that is then used to determine the significance of marriage. Moreover, while doing this, the analogy is inflated from a (now-reversed) metaphor into an ontological claim: the oneness of Christ and church, upon which the entire order of creation is founded and toward which it is heading, is not merely analogized to spousal unity but becomes the metaphysical basis of marriage itself: “Marriage is an outward and visible sign, given in creation, of the covenanted union between Jesus Christ and the Church” (MCC 3). This reading is an effect of the authors’ commitment to the specific view of Augustine’s *sacramentum* of marriage just reviewed and to the Neoplatonic metaphysic that underlies it. Ian McFarland, however, in providing Ephesians 5:32 with the canonical reading that MCC uncharitably claims the Task Force thought was unimportant (MCC 10), expressly rejects that interpretation.⁸ He instead reads the verse similarly to the Task Force, which

⁶ Kenneth R. Himes and James A. Coriden, “The Indissolubility of Marriage: Reasons to Reconsider,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 493.

⁷ Carolyn Osiek, “The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22–33): A Problematic Wedding,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32.1 (February 2002): 29–39; Sang-Wan (Aaron) Son, “The Church as ‘One New Man’: Ecclesiology and Anthropology in Ephesians,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 52 (2009): 18–31.

⁸ Ian McFarland, “A Canonical Reading of Ephesians 5:21–33: Theological Gleanings,” *Theology Today* 57.3 (October 2000): 355–56.

maintains that marriage is “an icon for and of the Church” because, in signifying and emulating “God’s grace and to God’s glory,” marriage becomes “an evangelical sign of that ‘wonderful and sacred mystery’ that is Christ’s body, the Church.”⁹ Whose perspective is more authentically Pauline? If it is the Task Force’s, can the MCC reading of Ephesians 5:32 bear the theological weight the essay thrusts upon it?

Moreover, while MCC does not invoke the fraught concept of gender complementarity¹⁰ and in fact indicates the church could profit from more nuanced theologies of gender (MCC 19), one must ask: given that MCC claims that to affirm same-sex marriage would undercut the “basic Christian anthropology” of Genesis 1:27, which states that God created humanity male and female (MCC 2, 13), and given that their union as one flesh in marriage is *sacramentum* of the covenant between Christ and church in MCC’s “Augustinian” argument from Ephesians 5:32, what, other than gender complementarity, could be the basis for the authors’ objection?

If marriage were understood to evince a particular quality of relationality, a dynamic interplay of unity and difference resulting in a “new creation” effected by the marital bond, as the Task Force report contends,¹¹ and given the authentically Pauline pronouncement in Galatians 3:28 that there is no longer male and female in Christ (a text that MCC ignores), then at least some same-sex couples should be capable of displaying it. Yet, MCC maintains that is impossible by definition. This can only be because, for its authors, marriage must comprise a male and a female. They are, therefore, complementary. Theological resources exist, however, for re-conceptualizing complementarity between human beings in ways that go beyond sex and gender, ways that focus on the irreducible uniqueness of each human person¹² or on a holistic, integrated notion of complementarity that includes sexual orientation itself in its scope.¹³ Would not taking such views of complementarity on board alleviate at least some of MCC’s concerns? If not, why not?

(3) *Is it true that to affirm same-sex marriage is to advance a defective eschatology?*

Another way to overcome the gender complementarity trap might be to make an eschatological argument in which gender itself is no longer the salient characteristic of deep Christian relationality. MCC gestures approvingly toward the work of Sarah Coakley (MCC 7), who has made theological moves in directions similar to this. Nevertheless, MCC’s authors ultimately claim that “the Augustinian tradition” prohibits extoling an eschatological imagination in which gender becomes less relevant. This would be a “gnostic and spiritualizing” heresy that

⁹ Report of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage to the 78th General Convention, 20.

¹⁰ For a detailed description of this notion and the ways in which it is often used in theological debates about sexuality, see the Task Force report, 37–39.

¹¹ Task Force report, 39.

¹² Daniel P. Horan, “Beyond Essentialism and Complementarity: Toward a Theological Anthropology Rooted in *Haeceitas*,” *Theological Studies* 75.1 (March 2014): 94–117.

¹³ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, “Catholic Sexual Ethics: Complementarity and the Truly Human,” *Theological Studies* 67 (September 2006): 625–652.

seeks to deny the eschatological importance of the body (MCC 14). If that were true, it would be a serious charge. Eschatological thinking must be conditioned by the resurrection grammar of the Christian faith. Christians are servants of a Lord raised bodily from the dead and await a bodily resurrection. How we live in the body must be informed by a hope in the new heaven and new earth that bodily resurrection represents and of which it is the first moment. Present life should anticipate that future promise bodily, in all Christian practices.

Such hope in an indescribable future overflows and explodes our efforts to describe it (see Paul's attempt in 1 Corinthians 15, where he gives up trying to specify the characteristics of the "spiritual body" of the resurrection), let alone to contain it. The transformed quality of relationality that simply *is* the coming of the reign of God (the *basileia tou Theou*) appears where it wills, regardless of our desire to theologize it into tidy definitions and boundaries.¹⁴ Rocketing like a bullet train from God's promised future into our present, the (always partial) healing of our deep brokenness, our sin, by the irresistible reconciling power of God's grace smashes dead certainties and moralistic conventions, subversively disclosing and bringing into being the radical, thoroughgoing relational communion of the new creation, now, in history, in the body, even if only by anticipation and never fully.¹⁵ Does this mean anything goes, in marriage or in any other matter? Certainly not. Providentially, we have sound guidelines for helping us carry out the difficult work of discernment.

"The fruit of the Spirit," writes Paul, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (Galatians 5:22–23). God's Holy Spirit is breaking in to human lives wherever these qualities are coming into the world, wherever movement toward the deep communion of the *basileia* is occurring. The Episcopal Church, during its long process of discerning the presence of the Spirit in the relationships of LGBT people—stretching back now more than fifty years—has increasingly come to see in same-sex relationships the sanctifying presence of the Spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. To affirm that these relationships can demonstrate the same qualities that have always been expected of opposite-sex marriages is not to capitulate to culture. It is to perceive in them the glimmer of *eschatological communion*, between human persons and between humanity and God, of which marriages of any variety may truly be the icon.

The MCC authors claim that proponents of same-sex marriage may not be as "prophetic" as they suppose themselves to be because "prophets have called God's people *back* to the tradition, just as often as they have announced new things" (MCC 21–22). Indeed. But is there not a sense in which same-sex marriage is serving that very purpose? LGBT folks are arguing for marriage at a time when overall marriage rates are declining. Why? Because at least some LGBT couples recognize in marital union the shape of eschatological desiring, the interpenetration of

¹⁴ See Scott MacDougall, *More Than Communion: Imagining an Eschatological Ecclesiology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁵ John P. Manoussakis, "The Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology," *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007): 29–46.

divine and human *eros* that MCC claims is missing from the Task Force report (MCC 8), the *advent-ure* of loving and being loved, totally, unconditionally, and permanently. Far from being a threat to opposite-sex marriage, same-sex marriages can bring back into view what their heterosexual counterparts have often forgotten, prophetically reawakening them to what makes marriage truly sacramental. In marriage, we give and receive something like the love of the Creator for the creation and of Christ for his church. We are proleptically transformed into new creations and yet become ever more ourselves. We come both to better understand and to represent—to ourselves, to one another, and to the world—the committed, other-affirming promise of God to love creation into its fulfillment. Is this not a thoroughly bodily, thoroughly eschatological, and thoroughly Christian understanding of marriage?