

The Liberal Response

DEIRDRE J. GOOD, WILLIS J. JENKINS,
CYNTHIA B. KITTREDGE, EUGENE F. ROGERS, JR.*

We first want to thank our colleagues for their paper, “Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology: A View from the Traditionalists,” which sets out their position clearly and describes with care and respect a number of different positions. Our discussions together in the preparation of these papers have been difficult, at times emotional and passionate, and mutual trust has been hard won. Our arguments have made clear to all of us the theological, political, and personal stakes for the church’s witness to marriage. We have all shared concerns that our work together might be misunderstood, manipulated, or enlisted by church parties in ways that would contravene our purposes in working together. We are then grateful to the traditionalist panel for undertaking honest inquiry into the question of same-sex marriage in the midst of such a fraught context.

We offer this response so that readers may know how we understand the significance of our disagreements over marriage, to explain why the arguments proceed differently, and to point out some implications. Church parties will quickly draw their own implications so we wish here to be forthright about one: the church can include both of these witnesses to marriage. In our judgment, neither paper scandalizes the faith nor ruptures the church. On the contrary, both papers describe faithful patterns of marriage that the church needs for its witness to the truth. Our disagreement is over patterns of holiness and pastoral practice—not over the dignity of all persons, the significance of marriage, or the truthfulness of the gospel.

* Deirdre J. Good is Professor of New Testament at The General Theological Seminary, New York. Willis J. Jenkins is Margaret A. Farley Assistant Professor of Social Ethics at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut. Cynthia B. Kittredge is Academic Dean and Ernest J. Villavaso, Jr. Professor of New Testament at the Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina.

The Divide

Readers will observe that the traditionalist and expansionist arguments proceed almost along parallel tracks, so that they rarely come into direct conflict. This is because the papers use different methods to different purposes. The conservative paper argues that accepting same-sex marriage contradicts moral teachings of Scripture and the guidance of reason by natural law. It therefore defends readings of Scripture that support traditional heterosexual marriage, in part by guarding against comparisons with previous social questions about slavery and the roles of women. It supports those readings with natural law principles of sexual complementarity and procreative purpose in marriage. Our argument, on the other hand, does not reason from specific social teachings but from the moral patterns of Scripture. We do not, then, attempt to defeat biblical suspicions of various sexual relations, but rather to show how God uses marital faithfulness to heal and perfect sinners. Our argument does not seek to overturn biblical accounts of marriage and sexual morality; on the contrary, it upholds and deepens their theological meaning. We support our reading of marriage not by appealing to natural rights or to inclusive justice, but by showing how same-sex marriage fits within the scriptural liturgy and orthodox theology of the church.

Both papers demonstrate the burden that an expansion of marriage must bear within the Anglican Communion. The traditionalist paper points to the majority sentiment of the Communion, where many members are suspicious of North American innovations and Western sexual culture. Our argument acknowledges that burden by demonstrating how an innovative witness to marriage is part of the Episcopal Church's mission within its culture and by explaining how missional innovation sits within a New Testament pattern of church unity and discernment.

Because of our sense of the church's mission, we argue for blessing same-sex marriages, not for blessing civil unions or same-sex domestic partnerships. While some civic and legal strategies reserve the word "marriage" for relationships between male and female, and use another term such as "union" or "partnership" for relationships between two women or two men, the distinction does not make sense within the life of the church. There, marriage is a discipline, a means of grace, and a type of the relationship of Christ with the church. Our argument therefore eliminates the option of "halfway houses" and compromises. We agree with the traditionalist paper and Archbishop

Williams that public blessing of same-sex unions would function as Christian marrying, and we acknowledge with them that sentiment in the Communion stands against that.

We do not then argue for same-sex marriage lightly or in disregard of the Communion. We do so for the sake of the mission of our church within the Communion, as a way of giving our testimony to the work of the Spirit among us. Our position seems pressed upon us by the witness of same-sex couples, the pastoral practice of the church, and the sacrament of marriage. There is a wealth of theological, ethical, and hermeneutical work done in support of including sexual minorities in the life and leadership of the church, and of recognizing faithful same-sex partnerships as legitimate ways of living a Christian life. For the sake of mutual understanding and responsibility, our argument proceeds from the church's liturgical tradition and practices of moral formation. For we want our companions in mission to hear us say this: expanding our blessings of marriage to include partners of the same sex does not undermine marriage; it upholds and strengthens it.

An important role for traditionalists in the Episcopal Church, their paper notes, is to continue taking part in the debates of the Communion, for they are well-placed to serve as an interpreter of each side to the other. They have improved our understanding of opposing views from other parts of the Communion. We hope that by understanding our missiological appraisal of social changes in sexual attitudes and marital practices in Western societies, they can help interpret the situation of expansionists in the Episcopal Church to the rest of the Anglican Communion. The purpose of our proposal is not to defeat a traditionalist position, but to provide a catechesis of marriage for the church within its context.

Scripture

The two papers take different approaches to Scripture, but neither undermines its authority for the Christian life. They do not differ as enlightened opposed to fundamentalist, or modern versus premodern. The traditionalist paper worries that its argument will be dismissed as fundamentalist, but we do not make that charge. Nor do we denigrate premodern models of hermeneutics. On the contrary, we point to instances of Scripture reading Scripture (e.g., Paul quoting Genesis) and of the liturgy reading Scripture. So we read with the earliest church, with the *Book of Common Prayer*, and with patristic and medieval interpreters.

We also read with an expanded community of readers, including many whom the church has not previously recognized and some whom the biblical texts do not address as subjects. In the authorial perspective of some biblical texts, women, wives, slaves, Gentiles, and sexual minorities are subordinated as persons and silenced as mutual interpreters of God's revelation. The expanded readership of the Christian church now questions these attitudes and the social presuppositions on which they were based. We read scriptural texts about marriage in a culture and world of ideas where the model of the authority of husband over wife, master over slave, and parent over child has been substantially revised in the direction of egalitarianism, mutuality, and democracy. We welcome this development as positive and related to Christian social witness. Of course, modern notions of freedom, equality, and autonomy have their corruptions and abuses, and, of course, these ideas have been negotiated within a wider culture, but their impulses and logic have come in significant measure from the Christian tradition.

Within Christian churches, the ideal of marriage has already been modified by all these factors. Within our church, the *Book of Common Prayer* elevates "mutual joy" as one of the purposes of marriage (1979 BCP, 423). The spiritual dimensions of marriage have been elaborated in the Christian tradition to deepen and expand Paul's view of marriage as a poor alternative to celibacy or a remedy for lust (1 Cor. 7). In light of all these factors, the liberal paper does not deny overwhelming evidence that biblical writers assumed heterosexual marriage. Our expansion of marriage, however, retains scriptural principles of moral discipline, nonconformity to the world, witness to Christ, sanctification, and holiness. We do not argue that biblical condemnations of homosexuality derive from a purity system that is obsolete for Christians. The question is not whether there should be distinctions made between sacred and profane and whether there should be rules for holy living, but what they should be in this time and place. How should this Christian community offer the gospel to its culture? We argue that in the North American context, for gay and lesbian couples to enter into Christian marriage blessed by the church represents a powerful Christian witness.

Pastoral Responses to Gay and Lesbian Christians

The traditionalist paper argues for abstinence, sublimation, or therapeutic change as the appropriate Christian responses to non-

heterosexual orientations. We argue that these pastoral responses are inadequate. Extending marriage strengthens its connection to the love of Christ for the church by discouraging practices in the pastoral care of homosexual persons that have shown their strengths and weaknesses precisely by their approach to marriage. The trouble with marrying people to members of the opposite sex, when the opposite sex is not apposite for them, is that it undermines marriage. It leads to lying of the body, adultery, and divorce, instead of the truthfulness of the body, faithfulness, and constancy. While rare cases may justify marriages of gay and lesbian people to members of the opposite sex, it should be discouraged because the risks are too high: rather, same-sex marriages better represent Christ's self-offering for the world. Salvation in Christ arose not from a great self-refusal, but from a great self-gift. "For God so loved the world." "This is my body, given for you." To live out that pattern, marriage must not bypass but, like the incarnation, take up the body in its movement of love. Marriage keeps love and the body together, as the incarnation and the Eucharist do. Certain alternatives to same-sex marriage fail because they signify the mystery of Christ and the church less adequately than marriage does. They do not take the body seriously enough for the incarnation.

Sometimes lesbian and gay persons enter into profound, long-term counseling relationships with spiritual directors or priests in an attempt to turn their sexual desires in a faithful direction. The reason why these counseling relationships work, when they do work, is the same reason why opposite-sex marriages sometimes work, to some extent, for gay men and lesbians: they work precisely because they are marriage-like. They feature a designated other person to whom one makes oneself accountable and from whom it is hard to escape. However, opposite-sex marriages and long-term counseling relationships also fall short of the mark for the same reason: they are not marriage-like enough. Neither permits the full christological commitment of "this is my body, given for you." Counseling deprives the counselee of the full christiform self-donation of giving his or her body. The counselee does not put his or her body on the line for the counselor as for a spouse. In a repudiation of the incarnation, they keep the body back from donation, evading incarnational cost. "The vocation to virginity must be something other than a frustration: it is a gift."¹

¹ Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 167.

Opposite-sex marriages for gay and lesbian people should worry us. “Love, like martyrdom, cannot be imposed on one.”² Only unions that follow the incarnation to befriend the body can hope that the martyrdom that they sometimes inspire will be not false witness, but true love. “It is possible that the most ascetic act [i.e., the best training in charity] is not renunciation of self, but total self-acceptance,” if it is oriented toward God and neighbor.³

Likewise, ex-gay ministries fail to follow the incarnation, because they use the body to exercise self-control, rather than self-donation to another. Only in self-donation can God expand the body toward the trinitarian exchange of gift, gratitude, and mutual joy. In self-donation, God became human. In self-donation, humans become open to God, but hardly in self-sufficiency. That resembles the pride that does not befriend but seeks to bypass and abandon the body.

Same-sex couples do not need marriage so that they can enjoy satisfaction, but so that they can practice sanctification. No traditionalist has ever yet seriously argued that same-sex couples need sanctification any less than opposite-sex couples do. Same-sex couples do not need marriage for self-expression: they need marriage for self-donation, for the daily challenges and rewards of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.

Science and Orientation

The traditionalist paper spends some effort contesting the biological science of sexual orientations and the social science of counting sexual minorities. Our argument rests on neither outcome. Scientific evidence about the cause of sexual orientation may be inconclusive, but scientific evidence about changing orientations is unanimous. Recognizing that individual orientations conduce to personal health, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexual orientation from its list of diseases in 1973. What some call “reparative therapy”—attempts to change non-heterosexual orientations—the American Psychological Association declared unethical in 1979. Whatever the mechanics of causation, health care professionals acknowledge sexual orientation as a given, prior to choice, a natural aptitude. It may be socially shaped but it does not go away. Minority orientations, whether they number in the few or many millions, cannot be ethically coerced into majority patterns of relationship.

² Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 188.

³ Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 100.

Attempting to change a person's orientation is unethical not only because it offends against personal integrity, but also because it betrays the very relationships in which we bear witness to the Spirit and through which God transforms us. Grace elevates nature; it does not destroy it. God transforms, changes, converts, and heals sinners, always in the direction for which God created them, for the relationships to which the Spirit calls them. The church as the body of God is not, then, in the business of destroying orientations, but of disciplining, realizing, and uplifting them. Grace is therapeutic for sinners by vindicating what God gives to each, enabling them to offer their own gifts to other persons, to the body of Christ, and to God.

The church does not need to await scientific certainty on the causes of sexual orientation in order to understand it as given. The will of God for human sexual practices does not lie in the gaps of research into orientations, for competing scientific theories nonetheless converge on a simple picture. We know that sexual orientation *begins* in the womb—whether by one gene, committees of genes, the hormonal environment, or some combination—and develops over time as the person does. As the Spirit creates variety in hovering over the waters of creation and diversifies the church in the waters of the font, so too the Spirit presides over the waters of the womb. “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13).

Like other natural aptitudes, sexual orientation is a christological condition; it shapes ways of participating in the body of Christ. In the case of orientation, God in Christ orients desire godward through various capacities to desire others. The Spirit hovers over the waters of the womb to prepare all persons for inclusion in the body of Christ. What the Spirit prepares in the wombs of all women images what the Spirit prepared in the womb of Mary and anticipates what the Spirit prepares in the womb of the font: persons meant to find their destiny in Christ's body. John the Baptist exhibited this aptitude of desire for Christ by leaping in the womb of Elizabeth. The Spirit distributes many and various ways to desire Christ, for the sexual differentiations and orientations that begin in the womb prepare us for particular patterns of invitation to put our bodies on the line for others.

The church has as its mission to teach all persons how what they have been given is known and consecrated by God even before the womb (Jer. 1:5). The church's mission is to model relationships in which persons can offer themselves as gifts. We argue that to further this mission, we should extend marriage to same-sex couples.

Innovation, Diversity, and Communion

The traditionalist paper characterizes our theology of marriage as new. On the contrary, while the practice of marrying same-sex couples would be new, our theology develops one of the three main ideas for marriage in the Christian traditions, and it defends that theory as everywhere implicit in the marriage rite of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Paul Evdokimov makes the crude but salient typology: the Catholic tradition has tended to base marriage on procreation; the Protestant tradition has tended to base marriage on the control of lust; and the Eastern Orthodox tradition has tended to base marriage on training in virtue, or sanctification.⁴ The advantage of this third approach—the one adopted here—is that it easily accommodates the other two and orients them both to an even higher goal: growth into God. Traditional goods of marriage—children and faithfulness—make sense within this sacramental end. Marriage becomes a means by which God may bring a couple to himself, by exposing them to each other: they may grow into love of God, by practicing love of the nearest neighbor. The growth of a couple into God prompts them to welcome children and to practice faithfulness. This Protestant-Orthodox approach may make a good fit for Anglicanism, because it has always tried to take the best from a variety of sources, and because, like Orthodoxy, it has always taken its theology from the liturgy.

These theologies of marriage are obviously not mutually exclusive. Marrying same-sex couples does not nullify other practices of marrying. The catholicity of the church cannot only accommodate but in fact requires these several witnesses to the marriage feast. That same-sex couples come late to the wedding feast is no reason to suppose they will cast out the others.

Matthew's parable of the laborers in the vineyard of the kingdom (Matt. 20:1–15) describes the means by which those who came late to the employment office for the vineyard are paid the same as all-day laborers on the basis of God's generous justice. Those who were able to commit early to the labor of the vineyard, which in this analogy is the grace and work of marriage, might well resent that others added to the workforce receive, at the end of the day, the same wages as those who have "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." To them the vineyard owner explains that they are not unjustly treated: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or

⁴ Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 15–22, 41–45.

are you envious because I am generous?” (Greek: “Is your eye evil because I am good?”) What is given is not only generous, but because it is given by God, it is also just.

Those who challenge generous justice in the parable, having already been paid, seem envious that God’s generosity extends to all who need it. Those who receive generous justice as the (unexpected) reward of their labors have only gratitude to God. Therefore, it is with those who come latterly to labor in the vineyard of marriage. They are the recipients of God’s surprising generosity for which we have nothing but gratitude. Here at the end of the day, are we not all laboring side by side in the vineyard of the kingdom?

We do not call for an end to disagreement, for that is part of the labor of our common baptism into God’s mission. The Father sent the Son and the Spirit into a finite and fallen world where only diversity could image infinity and only history could reconcile them. Baptism prepares human beings for this arduous process by binding them together, and promises them that contrary to human expectations, their disagreement will have been for blessing: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5). Under conditions of both diversity and division, disagreement can become a Spirit-given way of discerning the form of the Son. Baptism binds us together for the long process of making the body of Christ whole and complete in all its members. We are baptized into the Father, the Son, and the Spirit so that we can better disagree. The bonds of baptism tell us that there is no salvation without the others and require therefore the greatest freedom for disagreement rather than the narrowest slice of purity. For baptism’s commission is to go out, and its purview is the whole world. This is not a formula for uniformity. We need the other to differ from us.

However, not all labors of disagreement seem fitting. We have disparaged lawsuits over church property as a way of conducting disagreements. Liturgy, not litigation, is the consequence of our theology of marriage. We have also asked traditional Anglicans to refuse to let their disagreement with us permit hatred of homosexual persons, and have entreated them to stand in public witness against persecution of homosexual persons. For both sides, when a church makes enemies, it is bound to love them; where a church finds sinners, it is invited to eat and drink with them.

During a previous period of church controversy, when an international Anglican Communion was first taking shape, the church was torn by conflict between Tractarian and Evangelical factions. Then,

F. D. Maurice and other leaders counseled the church to listen to multiple witnesses to truth without becoming divided into parties, and so preserved the catholicity of Anglicanism. In 1 Corinthians, Paul welcomes multiple evangelists for Christ, but asks the church not to become divided into parties. In the book of Acts, when Peter and Paul disagreed, the Spirit extended the church through controversy. The Spirit distributes bread for the journey and holds out the promise of Pentecost that our different languages will not have been spoken in vain. It is the same Spirit who dilates the womb, expands the church, extends time, and opens debate.