

The Traditionalist Response

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The conversation between the traditionalist and liberal teams on this panel has been charitable and constructive, and we affirm the sincere desire of our counterparts to be faithful and to build up the church. At the same time, we find their argument confused and their exegesis mistaken, and we worry that the revision they advocate would be harmful to the life of the church. This is important to point out, for we readily acknowledge the quasi-homiletical eloquence of their paper, into which the reader may be caught up. There are extended sections of spiritual explication of the meaning of marriage which we found moving. The problem is that those sections do not actually bear on the question we have been commissioned to reflect upon, whether or not same-sex couples ought to be married. It is on the passages that deal with the question at hand, especially as they offer theological argumentation and scriptural interpretation, that we will focus our attention.

Our counterparts are offering what they themselves understand to be a surprising and “transgressive” argument. To this end there are places where words are used in highly unusual, even contrarian ways: passages in praise of celibacy now serve to undermine the norm of heterosexual monogamy, all in the service of homosexual marriages, which are described as “ascetical.” (One can only imagine how amazed the patristic and Orthodox authors cited would be to read the use to which their ideas are being put.) We will show how key biblical passages are made to stand on their heads; for example, Ephesians 5, with its explicit reference to male/female complementarity, is taken to

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say the opposite. These swerves in the argument slide by quickly, and our task will be to point out such detours. Our advice to readers is to remain focused on the question at hand.

Note well what is not in their argument, namely any treatment of the question of scientific evidence about homosexuality.¹ This is odd for several reasons: (1) its treatment was part of our mandate, and (2) it features prominently in popular arguments in favor of the blessing of same-sex relations. We would hazard the guess that the data in its ambiguity and inconclusiveness were not helpful to their argument.

What is the Core Argument?

It is always interesting when authors tell us what they are not saying at the outset. When our counterparts tell us that they are not offering an argument based on experience, spiritual enthusiasm, and cultural trend, they “doth protest too much,” for that is just what they in fact do present. Theirs is a pneumatic argument, an intuition of what they believe the Holy Spirit is doing in the world, namely the confirmation of the affirmation of gay unions, first in society and now in the church: they say, “the Spirit has contrived with social change.” They identify this movement as part of the *missio Dei*, the work of the triune God reaching out to the world through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Who could oppose that?

To see the problem in this apple-pie-and-motherhood argument, a word of historical perspective from the modern theology of mission

¹ Though they avoided the scientific discussion mandated for us in this project in their main document, the liberal side does wade into this debate in their response. At the outset, they acknowledge that the question of the etiology of homosexual orientation is a murky and controverted one. They then assert, “sexual orientation *begins* in the womb.” But how could this possibly be correct, since one side of the argument in the controverted debate about the causes of orientation emphasizes factors of human environment, of “nurture”? The liberal claim then expands exponentially: it is a “natural aptitude,” it is “nature” in a theological sense (in distinction from grace, and so as in itself a gift of creation), it is even a “christological condition” in which “God in Christ orients our desire godward,” indeed, a gift of the Spirit hovering over “the waters of the womb.” These huge claims stand in sharp tension with the starting point of scientific agnosticism; they are heavily freighted with debatable assumptions that are the stuff of the contention that runs throughout this whole debate (i.e., effect of the fall or gift of creation). Such bald assertions cannot stand up. For example, advocates of same-sex marriage acknowledge that for at least a few persons a significant cause of same-sex attraction may be abuse—how can this fit with this picture of divine prevenient orientation? Likewise all involved in this debate, liberal and traditionalist, agree that some people are oriented in a pernicious way, e.g., with sexual attraction to minors, whether of the same or the opposite sex. Surely, the orientation-granting Spirit did not hover over the waters of their mothers’ wombs.

(missiology) is helpful. The origins of the idea of the *missio Dei* are in the period after World War II, when figures such as Lesslie Newbigin and the German missiologist Georg Vicedom sought to emphasize the triune God's sovereign work as opposed to our own human plans and efforts. They worried that their contemporaries' "God was too small," and this idea would show his work in the whole world to be bigger. But the problem is to read what God's work is off the secular record of worldly events and movements alone. With the emergence of a more secularized missiology in the 1960s, it soon became apparent that the *missio Dei* bore for each writer a striking resemblance to his or her own agenda for social change in the world.² In other words, the danger is that, under the guise of mission, and marinated in a rich broth of trinitarian language, the idea becomes an occasion for the social agenda items their advocates already espouse. Far from being a means of turning our attention to God, it becomes a cover for the same old fixation on our own interests.

This is exactly what is going on in this argument. Our counterparts tell us that what God is doing in the world at present is the affirmation of same-sex couples in society and the church (= *missio Dei*). How do we know this to be true? The Spirit says so. How have they ascertained this? It is self-evident from their experience of these couples, from the trends of liberation in our culture, etc., at least to those who agree. This self-evidence is a kind of immediate intuition from looking at the world. This brings us to the next crucial stage in the argument: "Scripture demands to be interpreted in accord with the mission of God." So, passages that do not move in that direction can be ignored or can undergo a swerve in interpretation. Therefore, the pneumatic train of thought goes like this: Cultural intuition -> Spirit -> mission -> norm for reading Scripture -> rereadings in conformity to the mission.

Note what a radical change in biblical exegesis this will bring about. We are warned against readings that would constrain the work of the Spirit in the *missio Dei*. Surely, attention to what the words actually say should constrain readings; otherwise, it is hard to say that it is reading we are doing at all. An important part of the Scripture serving as a canonical authority for the church is that it can guide,

² The classic work on this is H. H. Rosin, "Missio Dei": *An Examination of the Origins, Contents, and Functions of the Term in Protestant Missiological Discussion* (Brill: Leiden, 1972). Lesslie Newbigin talks about his worries about the secularized direction the idea took, especially in the writings of Hans Hoekendijk, in his autobiography *Unfinished Agenda* (London: SPCK, 1985).

critique, and indeed constrain the judgments and decisions of the church. This power to address the church is clearest in cases of “repugnance” (see Article 20 of the Thirty-nine Articles), where a matter in question stands in direct contradiction to the plain sense of a passage, interpreted in keeping with the whole witness of Scripture. We will show that such is the case before us. It is precisely at this point that the debate over homosexual behavior, while it may not be (to use the unhelpful language of the Righter trial) “core doctrine,” does become a prime occasion for a debate over a doctrinal issue of great importance, namely the authority of Scripture itself.

There is, of course, an irony in the abstract use of God’s mission to the Gentiles, since it is in the service of a cause that continues to tear at the Communion we have as Anglicans from all the nations of the earth. The liberal argument offers confession of carelessness on this score and calls for greater neighborliness, but there is no indication of a willingness seriously to take counsel with our fellow nations in the Communion or to have our behavior constrained by their admonitions. They admit that they have “despised common patterns of discernment,” but counsel continuing in the same vein in spite of this fact. The idea that Gentiles from different vantage points can see for one another things one cannot see for oneself is absent; we are sorry, and then we do what we want to do. The real catholicity of fellowship, born of the *missio Dei ad gentes*, is marred.

Let us return for a moment to the core logic itself, for understanding it helps to answer an important question about the liberal case. There is a seeming tension in their document. They tell us that only now, in light of the Spirit’s movement in the lives of same-sex couples, can the plain sense of the passages in question be understood. However, at one point, they seem to acknowledge that Paul meant what we traditionalists are saying, except that the whole “male-female symbol system,” of which these views are a part, is problematic and must be reworked. This latter, more radical tack reminds us of an interpreter like Walter Wink,³ who more straightforwardly acknowledges that the Bible is on this subject uniformly negative, and goes on to claim that here the Bible is wrong. We are told that, where it is wrong, we need to move in the direction of greater progress and liberation. While there is a hermeneutical gap within the liberal argu-

³ See his review in *Christian Century* (June 5–12, 2002): 33.

ment itself between these two views, it provokes only a seeming tension, since it makes no theological difference.⁴ For both subthemes in the liberal argument evince a similar underlying logic, which is typical of method in modern theological liberalism: a general theme derived from the culture at large comes to serve as a norm for the reading of Scripture. In both cases, the experience of same-sex couples, growing out of a political and social movement, generates the norm, in the latter case more directly, in the former case in a more roundabout way via the invocation of *missio*.

If God has acted, as it is suggested in the *missio Dei* argument of the liberals, who are we to contend with God? For its advocates, the matter is already settled. So they naturally feel they must proceed, without waiting on more debate and regardless of consequences. This casts the context of dialogue in which we participate in a clearer light. We have addressed the question whether we ought to see this question as a “church-dividing issue.” Such an issue is properly understood as one that follows so directly from the very nature of the gospel that faithfulness requires action, come what may.⁵ So the liberals see this issue, for they believe they are only following what the Holy Spirit has already done. They proclaim confidently that this is already the “American mission” to the world. In just this way, the liberal side in the Episcopal Church, as they move forward unilaterally in diocese after diocese without regard to the effects on the Communion, are treating this issue as a “church-dividing issue.” As an aside, we may note the odd and awkward position this places us who advocate the traditional view on this subcommittee. It is more normal to consider arguments pro and con before the decision has been made!⁶

⁴ This difference of opinion within the liberal side itself, between the “new plain sense” claiming better to understand biblical texts, and a critique of those texts as patriarchal, may be found in the liberal response itself. The latter, more liberationist view asserts itself when the liberal response tells us that patterns of domination on which the biblical texts are based have been replaced by an emerging model based on “egalitarianism, mutuality, and democracy” (nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism lives!). We too are all for democracy as a political system, but making such markers of Western cultural progress the norm for judging Scripture is another matter.

⁵ In Reformation theology the technical term is the *status confessionis*, “the stand for witnessing.”

⁶ There is a potentially worrisome side to the pneumatic argument for the one who refuses to see what is claimed to be the work of the Spirit. How might Matthew 22:1–3, 9–13 come to be interpreted by the church about its conservative minority?

Misreading Scripture

In our main document, we have already treated the key passages, and we will not rehearse their arguments here. We recognize that there can be debate over the meaning of passages, and that passages can have multiple senses. However, this does not mean one can overlook or overturn what passages actually say, and such is the treatment key passages receive in the liberal argument. We can register these problems succinctly.

(a) *Acts 15*. This passage is foundational to the pneumatic argument. As the early church was opened to Gentile believers, so we now must open ourselves to same-sex marriages. But this swerves aside from some obvious facts: (i) the inclusion of the Gentiles was the fulfillment of prophetic hopes (see, for example, Isaiah 2:2–4), while there is no such warranted Old Testament hope in the case of homosexual relations; (ii) the opening to the Gentiles followed the decisive act of Christ at the turning of the ages. In contrast to them, we should not presume ourselves apostles at a new turning of the ages; (iii) the Jerusalem Council specifically forbids *porneia*, that is, “sexual immorality.”

(b) *Mark 10*. Here Jesus tells us of the nature of marriage, between a man and a woman, as ordained by God “from the beginning of creation.” In so doing, he quotes both Genesis 1 and 2. Yet, inexplicably, the liberal side continues to insist that Jesus avoided citing the former, and they find in this imagined avoidance evidence against what they call “complementarianism.” This is simply inaccurate.

(c) *Galatians 3:28*. The liberals read Paul’s statement that there is no more “male and female” in Christ as a warrant for same-sex marriages. However, this ignores the context of the passage, and the rest of the Pauline witness, and so amounts to proof-texting. Paul is, quite simply, not talking about marriage. While in Judaism only the free, Jewish male could contribute to *minyan* in the synagogue, now all stand together and equally in prayer in the *ekklesia*. Indeed, when it comes to salvation, there is no difference between male and female. Neither Paul nor we would suggest anything different, and so the use of this passage in a discussion of marriage amounts to presenting a straw man.

(d) *Romans 1 and 11*. As to the former, the liberal argument ignores what the passage in question actually says. They focus on the criticism of the Gentiles as being oversexed, but they ignore the fact that the passage refers directly to the sameness of same-sex relations,

including lesbian relations (so excluding the suggestion that Paul had only pederasty in view). The argument then proceeds to claim that the references to *para phusin* in Romans 1:26 and in 11:24 should be understood in the same way, as meaning “beyond nature.” The claim is that when the two passages are taken together, the latter one is speaking of God’s grafting in those involved in homosexual behavior discussed in chapter 1. This is clever but surely wrong. First, the tones and directions of the passages are starkly different. Second, the inclusion of the Gentiles does not mean the acceptance of all they do, especially behavior that he singles out as emblematic of their fallenness.⁷ Third, a phrase does not mean the same thing everywhere it is used, for meaning must take account of use and context. In fact, the Greek lexicon will confirm that the preposition *para* can mean a number of things, among them “beyond” and “against.”

(e) *Ephesians 5*. The liberal argument sees this passage as part of what they call the “participatory” theme in Ephesians in contrast to its hierarchical sections, and as such, they see it as a witness against gender complementarity. Given that the passage actually quotes Genesis 2 on the joining of man and woman, this reading simply contradicts what the passage actually says. Furthermore, it is ironic to deploy this passage against the procreative end of marriage, since it is part of the point of the type. One reason it serves as a “great mystery” is that the life-giving relationship of man and woman is a sign of the spiritually life-giving relationship of Christ and the church. Furthermore, it should be noted that the verses that immediately follow in chapter 6 have to do with children. The misreading of this passage points to a more pervasive problem in the liberal side’s hermeneutics. They offer an account of typology that claims that only the antitype (the thing to which the type refers) bestows meaning, “back” as it were, on the type itself. In other words, it is only Christ and the church that tell us how to understand male and female in marriage (in this case the type). To be sure, the type does not exhaust what one might know of the antitype. But surely male and female in marriage, a thing we do know something of, does tell us something about Christ and the church. That is, after all, the point of an analogy. The liberal reading of the typology, in which the meaning is “opened up” without restraint, conforms to the core wish not to confine the understanding of the *missio*.

⁷ 1 Cor. 6:11: “And this is what some of you used to be.”

A Consequence of Great Consequence

The reader may tire of all this exegetical debate, and wonder what is really at stake; the answer is “a great deal.” The liberal argument would, at the outset, have the reader understand the liberal proposal as a modest addition to the traditional understanding of marriage, which remains intact. But as the case continues, we see that a major reinterpretation is envisioned.⁸ The marital purpose of procreation is fine for those so inclined, but we may note the subtle shift from “purpose” as a goal given by God in creation, to “purpose” as an option that one might choose. Furthermore, we can cite a number of passages in the argument where procreation stands in contrast to the spiritual ends of marriage (consider, for example, “What the Spirit replicates in Christian marriage is not children *as such*, but children of God. . .”). The argument cites affirmatively the opinion that procreation as an end of marriage has been demoted since the advent of Christ. (This strange combination of a post-procreative dispensation and a sex-positive “asceticism” might best be named “Shakerism with benefits.”) Procreation is identified as “what the human being shares with brute animals,” as if this were a slight on us; for all the talk of bodiliness, the argument here has a gnostic tinge. We do indeed share our bodiliness with brute animals; here the biologist has something to say to the theologian. What is at stake here is the very nexus of creation and redemption, of which we spoke in our paper. Why should we assume that in matters such as ecology we do well to think and act “with the grain of creation,” but when it comes to the doctrine of the

⁸ At this point, we must dissent from the claim of the liberal side that they and we have no disagreement over the “significance of marriage.” While we applaud their highlighting of a dialogue, a common commitment to charity in this debate, we believe that the liberal transformation of the traditional end of procreation into a personal choice, and the relegation of childbearing to the old eon, amount to a seismic shift in the significance of marriage. The desire to blunt the sharpness of their argument is odd, given their willingness to follow its radical nature through much of our dialogue. Our disagreement can and should be charitable: in this vein, we welcome the rejection of litigation and happily and enthusiastically endorse rejection of all coercion and prejudice against gay people. At the same time, we honor one another more if we take seriously the fact that we have before us a real disagreement on which a great deal rides. To claim that it amounts to a celebratory diversity following from the very persons of the Trinity resonates rhetorically, but hides the fact that discernment means deciding and deciding has consequences. In fact, the advocates of same-sex marriage know this well, as they drive determinedly toward implementation of the revision. In this light, claims that the opposing sides are but complementary perspectives in the spirit of F. D. Maurice seems ironic.

human person, and our sexuality, we ought not to think and act so? Something theologically basic is at stake here which would have major consequences if this anti-breeding drift were to affect our understanding of the human person and of society. To cite but one implication, denigration of procreation leads to the “devaluing [of] . . . the bearing and rearing of children.”⁹ For the sake of transparency and candor, this needs to be made clear to the Episcopal faithful in the pews—one wonders what their reception of this dimension of the new teaching might be.¹⁰

Unmoored, and Drifting Where?

The liberal argument claims for itself boldness, and so we need to track its trajectory, since some of its implications will be different from what we might assume. One such example is the idea of monogamy inherited from the tradition, which turns out to be a vestige in its two-ness of the biological fact of conception, and so tied implicitly to the now demoted procreation. If marriage is now really about mutuality and self-donation, would there not be all the more of these in polyamory?

Equally worrisome is the implication of the argument’s view of sexual expression per se. As sexual beings, we inherently seek fulfillment according to our orientation.¹¹ We are told that only such expression can “get deeply enough into their hearts to promote lifelong commitment and growth,” which has a strange ring given the praise offered earlier in the argument to celibacy. The imperative of sexual self-expression is connected to what is called “befriending the body” (a phrase with a distinct popular psychological ring). To refuse to befriend the body is to deny one’s creatureliness and so to fall into sin. But even this is not all: the warrant for this befriending, we are told, is

⁹ Douglas Farrow, “Beyond Nature, Shy of Grace,” *IJST* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): 281.

¹⁰ The expansionist response cites a threefold typology of Evdokimov’s for the ends of marriage: procreation (Catholic), restraint of lust (Protestant), and sanctification (Orthodox). Precisely this kind of isolation of one end from another should be avoided. Surely, Genesis 2, 1 Corinthians 7, and Ephesians 5 are the common inheritance of the whole church.

¹¹ The treatment of orientation as a given and, as such, our nature ready to be taken up by grace, is given no backing in a treatment of the scientific evidence. In addition, we are left wondering about orientations of kinds that both teams would find pernicious. If they are settled do they require fulfillment, and if not, then “settledness” is not enough of a guide.

the incarnation of the Son himself. Sanctification is understood as the extension of the “project of incarnation” whereby God is transforming *eros* into *agape* through marriages. Our worry here has to do, not with the kind of rhetoric employed, but with the impression that it leaves.

First, it seems to expand the role of marriage drastically; at times it sounds as if marriage is simply how Christ makes atonement available to us, so that those who are unmarried are somehow left out (“refusal of this gift [marriage] risks refusal of the Spirit”). What happened to sheer faith? Second, when we hear that desire is necessary “to provide the energy for moral healing and growth,” we worry about a rhetoric that too blithely praises *eros* per se; our counterparts would agree that there is *eros* galore turned toward degrading, violent, and abusive purposes. Talk of *eros* must always have the doctrine of original sin near at hand. Third, we worry about a tendency to eroticize even our talk of God himself. While the tradition has been willing to speak this way in a mystical sense, the concept of the divine *Eros* has also posed problems for Christian self-understanding in the tradition, even without being connected to advocacy of sexual activity itself, as it is here.¹²

Conclusion

We do well to note several more general features of the argument as a whole. First, it is an energetic case for same-sex marriage. There is no interest here in evasive halfway blessings of unions. The real question at hand is the nature of marriage, and that is what liberals would debate. On this, they are to be praised for clarity and candor.

Second, this is not the proposal of some small addition to an otherwise stable institution. The problematic “male-female symbol system” requires a radical change. The inherited notion was a “warrant for patriarchal violence.” Marriage itself is now to be understood, for all, to be based on mutuality and self-giving regardless of gender. If

¹² Again, a comment by Douglas Farrow in “Beyond Nature, Shy of Grace,” in which he quotes Rogers’s book *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, is apropos: “‘God desires to enter into human bodies to be desired bodily by them.’ *Eros* is the real mediator here, in other words, not Jesus Christ. That is why withholding the sacrament of marriage is, for Rogers, tantamount to excommunication. Sex prefigures the Eucharist. . . . To close that sacrament to homosexuals . . . is to consign them to a ‘destiny toward nothing.’ It is an offense not only against their humanity, but against God, for it ‘gives God nothing by which to redeem them’” (279).

Tom happens to choose Peggy, but it could have been Bob—it is just a matter of choice. To reiterate, candor requires that the Episcopal Church make it clear that it understands all marriages in this radically new way.

Third, the argument offered by the liberal side is, whatever its strengths may or may not be, highly idiosyncratic. In our view, it is not an argument that would be recognizable or acceptable to most Christian traditions, or most Christians in the world. In other words, at the very least a long, long road would lie ahead of such an argument until one could say that it has been received by the faithful. In ordinary circumstances, this would delay implementation of its recommendations, but as we have observed, when it comes to discernment and doctrine, the Episcopal Church's *modus operandi* is far from ordinary. For all the quoting of Orthodox theologians, this argument is complicit in a change that could well spell the end of significant ecumenical relations for the Episcopal Church.

At the outset of our dialogue, we traditionalists offered as a key diagnostic issue the following question: Are same-sex relations an effect of the fall or a blessing of creation? If one opted for the former, one might still have a debate about how best to respond pastorally. However, the assumption throughout the liberal argument is for the latter, and when one chooses that road, one has no choice but to seek to undo the traditional account of the ordering of the sexes in creation itself, of complementarity, procreation, and the rearing of children.

A close reading of this case shows what it looks like to follow the progressive road consistently. Has the church truly measured the tower about making such a revised account normative, about teaching it in confirmation classes and premarital classes? To suppose that this case is consistent with a moderate accommodation out of pastoral concern with the traditional doctrine of marriage intact, as many Episcopalians, sensitive to the culture, may wish to do, simply does not follow from a close reading of this case. To follow this path promises something more radical.

In our dialogue, we have sought candor; let candor be the watchword here at the end of our remarks. We know ourselves to be part of our postmodern Western culture that valorizes autonomy and self-creation; it is not hard to see how we are readily and often tempted. Something there is in us that does not love a constraint, which wants it down, for it seems to us arbitrary and “heteronomous” (to use Tillich’s

term). We would define and control the genetics of our children, the terms of our dying, even the nature of marriage and its relation to the procreation of a new generation. Making marriage itself into an instrument of our own self-definition is then a case in point of something more pervasive. We would err if we left the impression that this fault lies especially with the advocates of same-sex marriage.

Let the last word go to Paul in the *locus classicus* of Romans 1. There he insists that homosexual relations are but a vivid example of the fallenness to be found in us all. We all partake in some way in the willfulness of our age. The ubiquity of the deeper problem cannot, however, deflect us from the task to which we are here called: to speak up when something as basic as marriage is redefined to our culture's better liking, and when our Christian colleagues would hear peace, peace, even if it means disregarding the very words of Scripture itself.