

A Response from Janet Trisk*

The House of Bishops which commissioned this project and the eight theologians who produced the report are to be congratulated on helping the church sharpen *theological* conversation in what has too frequently been a debate with much heat and little light. There is no doubt that the divisions on this issue are hurting the church and its part in the *missio Dei*. It is for this reason that this conversation is to be welcomed.

I was surprised that both groups chose to avoid discussing a genealogy of the understanding of marriage in the Bible and in the history of Christianity. There is no single theology of marriage.¹ Marriage has meant very different things in different contexts and so it seems simplistic to state, for example, that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation. Given, too, that Anglican theology is both Catholic and Reformed, though I appreciated the use of an Orthodox sacramental approach to an understanding of marriage, I believe that other theological positions would have enriched the liberals' discussion.²

In this short response I will highlight just some of the different understandings of marriage. Firstly, however, I wish to make a brief comment about method. Theology is not simply biblical exegesis, and no theological issue can be determined by reading texts alone. More fundamentally, though, even in the exegetical process no theologian in the twenty-first century can be oblivious of the bias of the biblical writers and interpreters, among whom "normal" means to be, *inter alia*, male and heterosexual. How we read the text, through whose lens we look and to whose voices we listen, is a choice which determines our outcome. The traditionalists note that they "understand homosexual attraction as not following the intended order of creation" (p. 45). This vantage point thus determines the outcome of their theological investigation. Everything they write about marriage is filtered

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¹ David H. Jensen, "God's Desire for Us: Reformed Theology and the Question of Same-Sex Marriage," *Theology* 109 (January/February 2006): 12.

² See, for example, Jensen's "God's Desire for Us," which argues for the blessing of same-sex unions from a Reformed theological position.

through this lens. The door is closed, before the investigation of what constitutes marriage is commenced. Reading through a different lens, for example the lens of a homosexual person seeking faithfully to live out her or his committed relationship in the church, may lead to a very different conclusion.

Marriage is viewed in various ways even within the confines of the Bible. In the Hebrew Testament polygamy was permitted (see, for example, Gen. 29:17–28) and men were allowed to take concubines too (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:13). Girls, who had no say in the choice of marriage partner, were married off as soon as they reached puberty in order to increase the numbers of the people of Israel. Men were forbidden to marry women of other tribes (Num. 25:1–9). The prophets Hosea and Jeremiah compare the relationship between God and Israel to a marriage covenant. Here we see a shift in focus from fertility to fidelity (see, for example, Hosea 1:2). This understanding of marriage as a covenant relationship was drawn into some Christian understandings of marriage. In the New Testament, monogamy seems to be favored, though as both papers note, an argument in favor of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom can be made.

In Western Christianity, despite Augustine's description of marriage as a *sacramentum*, it was only in 1563 that the Catholic Church required the presence of a priest for a marriage to be valid and binding.³ People in England could, before the Hardwicke Act of 1753, contract marriages themselves, without participation of either church or state. The change was only brought about in order to regulate transfers of property in aristocratic families.⁴ In other words, there is authority for the position that a couple who choose to live as married people are in a sense married. There is also recognition that marriage may equally be a way of regulating the ownership of property.

Reformed theology rejects the sacramental character of marriage. Calvin views marriage as both companionship and a remedy for lust.⁵ Contemporary Reformed theology, however, sees marriage as

³ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979), 30. See also Charles E. Bemmison, "Rethinking Marriage—Again," *Anglican Theological Review* 79, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 506–525.

⁴ See Duncan Dormer, *Just Cohabiting: The Church, Sex and Getting Married* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2004).

⁵ Jensen, "God's Desire for Us," 13.

gift rather than remedy and is rooted in a covenantal understanding.⁶ Again, the primary purpose (both for Calvin and the modern Reformed position) is not simply about procreation.

Against these various different understandings of marriage, the traditionalists argue that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation and that this implies that a marriage between same-sex couples should not be countenanced. However, they concede that marriage between opposite-sex couples who cannot or choose not to procreate is possible. The argument that “at the very least [this purpose implies] a marital partnership of a man and a woman” (p. 42) is therefore simply not logical. If opposite-sex marriages between people who cannot bear children are blessed, there seems no bar on this ground to same-sex marriages. Furthermore, this position seems to fail to take account of the very different context of marriage in biblical times (when the population of the earth in general, and the nation of Israel in particular, was small) and our own times, when overpopulation is one of the *threats* to life.

In conclusion, I return to the issue of theological method. It is true that those seeking to change an accepted teaching of the church bear the onus of showing the soundness of their reason for such change. It is also true, however, that for centuries Christian theology has been done by white, heterosexual men. What has been accepted and taught bears the stamp of what they regard as normal. As followers of the One who includes the outcast and stranger, it is to the detriment of the church that we ignore the voices of “others” in crafting our theology.

⁶ Jensen, “God’s Desire for Us.”

