

Submission to the Anglican Church of Canada Marriage Commission

In what follows I offer one line of reflection and questioning on the proposed change to the marriage canon to “allow the marriage of same-sex couples in the same way as opposite-sex couples.” I do not intend what I have to offer as, in any way, the whole story or a comprehensive (or even the decisive) treatment of the issues involved in this matter. Instead, I intend what follows as a sounding to be considered by the church in its process of discernment.

As I read the tradition of Christian reflection on marriage, the proposed change to the marriage canon signals a fundamental alteration of the meaning of marriage as it has been typically conceived by the church in general and in the Anglican Church of Canada in particular. However, the fact that the proposal involves such a fundamental shift is not in itself a necessary disqualification of the proposal. Anglicanism is a *living* tradition and the Holy Spirit continues to lead and guide the church in the *present* era, which ought to keep us from settling into any kind of static close-mindedness or fundamentalism. Similarly, though, as we aim to read Scripture in the present era, we do so within a *trajectory* of the Spirit’s leading and ought to pay due regard to how the church has heard the Spirit speak through the ages in the church’s theological and ethical norms.

In my opinion, the greatest advantage of the proposed change to the marriage canon is that it highlights marriage as a place of mutual self-giving love between a couple in an exclusive, lifelong commitment, and consequently as a sphere for sanctification.¹ The change to the marriage canon brings to the fore a thread of the biblical witness in which the relationship

¹ Some of the best theological writing in favour of same sex marriage that I have found includes Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 309-321; Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, Cynthia B. Kittredge, Eugene F. Rogers Jr., “A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View From the Liberals,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93.1 (2011): 51-87.

between Yahweh and Israel, Christ and the church, are described with nuptial language and depicted as structured by a relation of covenant fidelity that is both perpetual and exclusive. This thread forms a crucial aspect of how Christians have understood marriage. Indeed, it is attentiveness to this thread of the biblical witness that allows Christians to think constructively, and not always negatively, about sexual desire. We learn from this thread of the biblical witness that sexual desire is not necessarily evil in itself, but that sexual desire is most fully human when it is properly directed as personal self-giving within a relationship of fidelity, exclusivity and permanence. Within this sort of relationship, mutual self-giving love and desire have the potential to unlearn patterns of narcissism, selfishness, and manipulation and so reach a robustness that echoes something of God's own covenant love. Marriage, then, can be a place for the pedagogy of desire and love. Let us call this thread of the biblical witness and the Christian tradition the "companionship" dimension of marriage.

The companionship dimension of marriage was liturgically recognized by Anglicans at least as far back as the first edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549, which designates one of the "causes" of marriage to be "for mutuall societie, helpe, and coumfort, that the one oughte to have the other, both in presperitie and adversitie."² Furthermore, with the advent of effective contraception, Anglicans have continued to honor and protect the companionship strand of the biblical witness described above. Though Lambeth's pastoral guidance regarding contraception in the 1920s and 1930s came with warnings about the misuse of contraceptive technology, it was also a decisive affirmation that sexual intercourse within marriage has broader value than simply as an opportunity to conceive children.³ The Lambeth decision to counsel a careful, reflective use

² Brian Cummings, ed. *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 64.

³ See <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/1930-15.cfm>

of contraceptives can be seen as an attempt to support the rearing of children by thinking about the health of the spouses and the family unit as a whole over the span of a whole life.

The proposed change to the marriage canon furthers the theological trajectory of the Reformation-era concern for “mutual societie” and the early 20th-century Lambeth decision regarding the use of contraception by placing the companionship dimension of marriage at the centre of how the church understands marriage. However, where the proposed change to the marriage canon differs significantly from previous Anglican decisions about marriage is that it places the companionship dimension of marriage at the centre of the meaning of marriage to the complete *relativization* of another historic Anglican concern within the meaning of marriage, namely the dimension of procreation. Though it is true that the Lambeth provision for the use of contraception clearly undercuts any necessity for each *act* of sexual intercourse to be intentionally open to procreation, it appears to be assumed by Lambeth in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as in our Prayer Book tradition, that each marriage, when considered as a whole, will at least include an intention and biological openness to bearing and rearing children.⁴ The procreative dimension of marriage continued to sit alongside the companionship dimension of marriage as an integrated whole rooted in the inherent connection between creation and redemption. Changing the marriage canon to render sexual difference irrelevant to marriage detaches the companionship dimension of marriage from the procreative dimension of marriage.

⁴ The Anglican Church of Canada’s most recent *Book of Common Prayer* explains that “Matrimony was ordained for the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman; for the procreation of children to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord; and for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, in both prosperity and adversity.” *Book of Common Prayer* (Anglican Book Centre: Toronto, 1962), 564. The *Book of Alternative Services*, which continues to presuppose sexual difference in marriage, places mention of procreation in square parentheses, presumably as an optional element to include in the service: “Marriage is a gift of God and a means of his grace, in which a man and a woman become one flesh. It is God’s purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love, they shall grow together and be united in that love, as Christ is united with his Church. The union of man and woman in heart, body, and mind is intended for their mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love [and that they may be blessed in the procreation, care, and upbringing of children].” *Book of Alternative Services* (Anglican Book Centre: Toronto, 1985), 528.

That is to say, by defining marriage as a monogamous and enduring sexual relationship between two *people*, rather than between a man and a woman, the proposed marriage canon essentially treats openness to the physical begetting of children within marriage as a voluntary and unnecessary element left to the decision of the spouses. This, it seems to me, is where the significance of the proposal lies for the meaning of marriage. There are several implications to the detachment of the procreative from the companionship dimension of marriage mentioned in our Scriptural, theological and liturgical tradition.

First, the manner in which the proposed change to the marriage canon separates the companionship and procreative dimensions of marriage is especially difficult to reconcile with the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish/Israelite heritage which Christians have always (though sometimes awkwardly) insisted upon. That is to say, the proposed change to the marriage canon would drive a wedge between the Old Testament and New Testament without any attempt to reconcile them theologically. The Hebrew Scriptures seem to place procreation at the centre of marriage, perhaps even at times downplaying what I have called the companionship dimension of marriage (though there are exceptions, such as the Song of Solomon, Genesis 2, and Isaac and Rebekah). The New Testament, however, does appear to give more prominence to the companionship dimension of marriage along with what we might call the “sacramental” dimension—that the covenant relationship between a husband and wife is somehow a sign of and is ordered by the relationship between Christ and the church (e.g., Ephesians 5). If, indeed, there is a shift from the Old Testament emphasis on procreation to the New Testament elevation of the companionship dimension, it calls for a theological account. What the New Testament, and the Christian tradition generally, does not do is detach entirely the companionship dimension of marriage from the procreative dimension of marriage. To do so would render marriage as

friendship, which is another human good, but has always been seen by Christians as distinct from marriage.⁵ Though not without his problems, we might look to St. Augustine for an example of Christian thinking in which the work of Christ is shown to have altered the shape of marriage from the Old Testament in such a way as to make Christian marriage indissoluble and monogamous. This is how Augustine accounts for the New Testament prohibition of divorce, the polygamy of the patriarchs, and the option of life-long celibacy.⁶ For all of his problems in interpreting marriage, what St. Augustine tries to avoid doing at all costs is to sever entirely Christian marriage from marriage as understood in the Old Testament, because to do so would be to drive a wedge between creation and redemption. In my opinion, what is needed before the marriage canon should be changed is an account of how marriage between members of the same sex can be understood as related to the Old Testament and particularly the doctrine and narrative of creation. Furthermore, I also think the proposal is in need of a theologically-sound account of way that the canon of Scripture integrates of the procreative and companionship dimensions of marriage in such a way to make coherent theological space for same sex couples.⁷

Second, the change to the marriage canon would officially and publicly alter the way that children are understood within the church's public liturgies. Should the change to the marriage

⁵ In a helpful essay, the Rev'd Dr. Gary Thorne discusses the relation of marriage and friendship. See Gary Thorne, "Friendship: The End of Marriage," in *Human Sexuality and the Nuptial Mystery*, ed. Roy Jeal (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 45-64.

⁶ See St. Augustine, "On the Excellence of Marriage," in *Marriage and Virginitly*, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/9, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 33-64.

⁷ Perhaps a detachment of the companionship dimension of marriage from the procreative dimension of marriage could be addressed by treating procreation as a metaphor for something like "productive ministry" or "service" or even "spiritual parentage." That is to say, perhaps a marriage that did not include the literal bearing of children could be seen as somehow "procreative" by virtue of the benefits it may bring to the church and world—good works, making disciples, etc. However, though I would certainly want to honour in the most explicit way the manner in which the ministry of married couples without children is profoundly beneficial to the church and world, eliding the difference between such good works and the procreation of children begs the question of the relation between the thing itself and its analogue, of physical procreation to a metaphorical (for lack of a better word) "spiritual procreation." I would argue that the physical bearing of children makes important contributions to the distinctiveness of marriage, and those contributions are not matched self-evidently by treating physical procreation as equivalent to good works (of which more will be said in the body of the essay).

canon go forward, the relationship between children and marriage would be publicly and liturgically severed. Rather than the bearing and rearing of children being a natural and typical outworking of living the marriage covenant, children would be made a strictly optional and voluntary add-on to marriage, contingent on the preferences of the marriage partners. In effect, all children would be treated as a potential bonus to marriage, rather than the natural and typical fruit of the marital covenant and built into marriage's structure. Of course, a voluntarist mentality surrounding children already exists inside and outside the church due to the nearly ubiquitous unreflective use of contraception. The difference that the change in the marriage canon would make is that now such a view of children would be built into public liturgy and canon, whereas prior marriage liturgies kept at least a thread of connection to the procreation of children. A change on this front communicates a strong message about the role and value of children in relation to marriage. The changed marriage canon would make children optional and ultimately subordinate to the desires of the marriage partners. In my view, before the marriage canon is changed there should be a clear account of the role of children in relation to marriage that counters the prevailing notions and practices in contemporary culture that treat children as a luxury item, a status symbol, a hobby, or a "bonus feature" to marriage. In fact, regardless of the decision of the General Synod with respect to changing the marriage canon, I do hope that our church can take this opportunity to offer significant reflection to the theological identity and role of children in relation to marriage and the church generally.

Fourth, the severing of the procreative from the companionship dimensions of Christian marriage may actually undermine the companionship dimension of marriage itself. One effect of maintaining a biological openness to procreation as an essential feature of marriage, as represented by the sexual difference of the spouses, is to frame marriage as the mutual

undertaking of rearing a family—a life partnership in the common endeavour of caring for and cultivating the next generation of the God’s image-bearers and potential disciples of Christ. In such a view, marriage maintains a distinctive public function; marriage matters to the wider community—both the community of the church and the wider social community—because the continuation of the community depends on the success of the child-bearing and child-rearing endeavour that marriage enables and supports. The important contribution of the companionship dimension of marriage can find a home in this endeavour and, indeed, it is a tragedy when it does not. The sanctification of desire and the mutual self-giving in love of one spouse to the other are directed, not just to the other spouse, but to the atmosphere in which the rearing of children takes place. That is to say, sexual desire and expression, in a vision of marriage in which the procreative and the companionship dimensions are united, do not find their end in the sexual fulfillment of either spouse. Rather, they shape a context of love and affection for the rearing of children and, ultimately, for service to the church and world. By officially and explicitly severing the companionship and procreative dimensions of marriage, making procreation entirely optional, desire and love would have their end in the sexual fulfillment of the spouses and not necessarily be directed through their children to the wider community. The change in the marriage canon risks institutionalizing love to a purely private sphere. It needs to be discerned by the church if such a move would significantly weaken marriage and undo the strings that encourage marriage to remain monogamous, perpetual and public. In my opinion, before the marriage canon should be changed as per the proposal, an account of marriage should be offered that would show marriage to be directed to the public good of the church and political community beyond the sexual fulfillment and satisfaction of the spouses.

Finally, to abolish the necessity for the sexual difference of the spouses, and with it the central function of procreation in marriage, risks confusing the so-called “sacramental” dimension of marriage. The thread in Scripture that depicts the relationship of Yahweh and Israel and Christ and the church as a marriage was received in the Christian theological and liturgical tradition as an organizing and interpretive structure for human marriage. That is to say, the divine-human covenant in both the Old and the New Testament provides a framework, structure and model for marriage covenants among the people of God. Removing sexual difference in marriage renders this symbolic structure problematic. The differently sexed bodies of a male and female in a life-long, exclusive covenant relationship tied to the furthering and nurturing of the next generation of human beings is the “stuff” used by God to signify divine self-giving love to the world. Sexual difference is, in a way, analogous to the bread, wine and water by which the official sacraments of the church work to communicate the Gospel. Just as the church would not change its canon to substitute other created substances for bread, water and wine in Eucharist and baptism (though there may be pastoral reason for doing this on a case-by-case basis) so the structures of sexual difference are the suitable material for the sacramental character of marriage. In my view, what is needed before the marriage canon is changed would be an account of the sacramental/symbolic relation of human marriage to the covenant between God and his people (Israel and church) that shows how sexual difference is not essential to the relation.

Perhaps these questions can be adequately answered. At very least, I would hope that the concerns articulated here are weighty enough to warrant further theological, ethical, and missional discussion of marriage within the Anglican Church of Canada. As is apparent, I have not attempted to address many of the questions closely related to the main subject matter of the marriage canon—questions about pastoral care, pastoral exceptions, the relationship between

baptismal identity and sexual identity, and the relationship between the public structures of the church and the lived lives of parishioners. These are crucial questions to discuss. However, due to the specific nature of the proposal facing General Synod to change the marriage canon, I have focused my reflections more narrowly.

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