Dear Woody,

As you know, the Episcopal Church's (TEC) Task Force on the Study of Marriage (TFSM) will propose Resolution A050 at TEC's General Convention next month (June 2015) which would change the church's canons to allow for same-sex couples to marry alongside opposite-sex couples. On the way toward making this resolution, the TFSM has produced several documents to buttress its proposal. Central to one of those documents is a theological engagement with Scripture. In so doing, the TFSM acknowledges the centrality of Scripture both in the formulation of TEC's own marriage canons as well the understanding of marriage in the church catholic. Hence, if any amendment to those canons is to be accepted, it must also in some way be grounded in Scripture.

The basic shape of the TFSM's engagement with Scripture is striking. It may be summarized thus: The welter of canonical voices—from Genesis to Deuteronomy to Hosea to Matthew to Ephesians—offers multiple incompatible theologies of marriage. In the messy history the Bible portrays, marriage is a matter of "variations and discontinuities." (The crassest form of this kind of approach is placarded on a T-shirt I saw recently. Under the heading "Biblical Marriage" was a schematic including "Man + Woman," "Man + Wives + Concubines," "Man + Brother's Widow," "Man + Woman + Woman + Woman…," "Male Soldier + Prisoner of War," "Male Slave + Female Slave," and on and on. The point was obvious: there is no such thing as one "biblical" view of marriage.) The TFSM's report mostly avoids the tendency to caricature its potential naysayers, but it shares the sloganeer's skepticism about discerning any unifying thread that would unite the Bible's disparate marital models into one fabric. The TFSM is struck, on the contrary, by "how complex, evolving, and contradictory our Scriptures are on the subject, and therefore how tricky it is to speak of 'the biblical view of marriage.'"

The TFSM is not the first to note the alarming (were it not obvious) fact that Scripture can yield a plethora of incommensurable readings. "The text has inexhaustible hermeneutical potential," says the guild of biblical scholars today, but such a conclusion was anticipated over 1,800 years ago by the church father Irenaeus. Perhaps the most famous instance in Christian history of a theologian facing this hermeneutical problem squarely is his second-century contention with the Valentinians. "Suppose someone would take the beautiful image of a king, carefully made out of precious stones by a skillful artist," Irenaeus wrote, "and would destroy the features of the man on it and change it around and rearrange the jewels, and make the form of a dog or of a fox out of them, and that rather a bad piece of work."[1] Scripture, in other words, is susceptible to competing, contradictory understandings, and we need some way of addressing this thorny conundrum.

---

[1] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, Eng. trans. ANF 1 (1885; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1.8.1.

But where Irenaeus recommends recourse to a kind of guidebook or norm that offers a proper arrangement for the precious stones (the apostolic "rule of faith," Tertullian called it), the TFSM suggests something less concrete. When it comes to discerning a Christian theology of marriage from the various portions of Scripture, we are told that priority should be given to those passages in Scripture that "truly reflect God's will." Just as Jesus relativized portions of the Mosaic law in light of the demands of love, so too the church today should be prepared to "nuance" even Jesus' own teaching as found in the canonical New Testament.[2] Furthermore, whatever claims they may make to the contrary, those who hold the "traditional" view—those, like you and me, who define marriage as the union of male and female—do the same, according to the TFSM. How to discover the criteria for such hermeneutical selectivity is left unarticulated, but one assumes that the obvious care and devotion same-sex couples demonstrate for each other and for their communities is viewed by the TFSM as one of the hermeneutical keys, if not the primary, salient one.

***

At least two things stand out to me about this proposal. First, to bracket the TFSM's concern with the "traditional" view for the moment and to stay with its "revisionist" proposal, it is curious that the TFSM shows little apparent interest in some of the most stimulating and provocative "revisionist" theology currently on offer. Take, for instance, James Brownson's recent book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*.[3] Brownson's is a serious, weighty effort to discern a canonical trajectory in favor of contemporary same-sex marriage. Granted, Brownson is coming from a more overtly evangelical starting point, assuming there is a profound theological unity of the two-testament canon. But I would have hoped that efforts like his would have received more notice from the TFSM.

Brownson's thesis is that we must discern the underlying "moral logic" of Scriptural commands before we can embody and enact Scripture's moral vision in our own time and place. If we ask about the moral logic that explains why same-sex erotic activity is forbidden in the biblical texts regarding homosexuality (Genesis 19; Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10), Brownson argues that the traditional view of "gender complementarity" is nowhere "explicitly portrayed or discussed" in Scripture. Genesis 2:24, the primary text to which traditionalists appeal to establish that complementarity, is, he argues, not speaking primarily of the *difference* between male and female but rather of their *sameness*. The "flesh of my flesh" idiom in Genesis 2:23 does not necessarily denote an anatomical, sexual "fit" between equal-but-different partners but rather kinship (cf. Gen. 29:14; Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 19:12-13; 1

---

[2] For a careful, theologically astute discussion of this issue, see Walter Moberly, "The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Debates about Homosexuality," *Theology* 103 (2000): 251-8.

[3] Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013.

Chron. 11:1). On this reading, the Old and New Testament rejection of same-sex erotic behavior is not based on a commitment to "gender complementarity" but rather on fear of cultic prostitution (in Leviticus), idolatry (1 Cor. 6), or an "excess of desire" (Rom. 1). And this, in turn, raises the question of what the biblical writers would have made of same-sex sexual relationships that do *not* show evidence of idolatry, promiscuity, and excess. Brownson suggests that when such relationships function like a "one flesh" kinship bond, then there is no reason why the church should not welcome and bless such unions between Christians.

Notice the distinctives of Brownson's approach. First, he offers a serious effort to interpret Scripture as having a coherent development. The TFSM's description of a grab-bag plurality of biblical views of marriage is not the note Brownson sounds. Instead we are offered one responsible attempt not to "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another" (as Article XX of the Thirty-Nine Articles has it). Brownson seeks to discern a plausible historical meaning for Genesis 1-2, which he then sees as deepened, or at least not overturned, by apostolic teaching in Romans 1 and Ephesians 5. Finally, he seeks to make contemporary Christian ethical recommendations in a way that adheres to the canonically unified trajectory he believes he has discovered in Scripture.

To take another instance, we might consider a recent book by the Anglican ethicist Robert Song titled *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*.[4] Song's commitment to Scripture's normative authority is as clear as Brownson's, though their respective interpretations diverge markedly. Unlike Brownson, Song is convinced that Genesis 1-2 *does* describe some kind of "gender complementarity" that is oriented to procreation. "Children," he writes, "are not inserted into the partners' companionship from the outside by the wave of a wand, but are a blessing of God that arises from the heart of the relationship of male and female: a child is the entirely proper and fitting expression in the oneness of his or her flesh of the parents' own one-flesh bond."

What, then, is Song's rationale for a revision to the "traditional" Christian view of marriage? Just this:

> [A]ccording to the Christian narrative of the redemption of the world in Christ the Church has no ultimate stake in the propagation of the species or the indefinite continuation of society outside of Christ… Sex BC is not the same as sex AD… Life in the community of the resurrection is life in which the hope of children is no longer intrinsic to the community's identity.

In other words, with the coming of Christ, the axis of history has shifted. The need of the believing community to procreate in the face of death is gone, since Christ has defeated death. In the resurrection, when death is abolished, Jesus says that "they neither marry

---

[4] London: SCM Press, 2014.

nor are given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30). There would be no need for marriage and childrearing in a world without death. Therefore, since Christians believe that that decisive defeat of death has happened already in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we are those who can sanction—and indeed celebrate—sexual partnerships that are not oriented to bearing children.

Song's argument is based on dense, rich exegesis both of the Old Testament creation narratives (Genesis 1-2), the Dominical teaching about marriage (Mark 10; Matthew 19, 22), and the apostolic preference for celibacy (1 Corinthians 7). Song seeks to integrate all this material in a theologically coherent synthesis by pointing to the radical, apocalyptic disjuncture between the norms of creation, in which marriage bears an intrinsic relation to childbearing, and the new, eschatological creation, in which celibacy and marriage point to a deathless kingdom in which procreation is no longer necessary in the way it formerly was. Again, like Brownson but unlike the TFSM, Song's approach is deeply versed in the languages of Scripture and classic Christian theology. As a friend of mine commented to me when he read it, "Song knows the Christian tradition and is trying hard to work within it; his ethics is shaped by dogmatic commitments, notably creation and eschatology, rather than relying on impressionistic appeals to ill-defined concepts ('justice'; 'love'; 'equality') of the sort that seems to dominate so much revisionist literature in this area."

And more names could be mentioned here—Eugene Rogers (and his important book *Sexuality and the Christian Body*),[5] Douglas Campbell (who is at work on a book on Paul and sexuality and has already made forays in this area),[6] Sarah Coakley (whose *God, Sexuality, and the Self* is a Trinitarian proposal for an ascetic theology of desire, drawing on Romans 8, among other biblical texts),[7] Susannah Cornwall,[8] and Graham Ward,[9] among several others.[10] The point is that all of these represent serious efforts to engage Scripture and the Christian tradition in a notably different way than the one given by the TFSM.

***

[5] Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

[6] Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), p. 127-9.

[7] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[8] Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010).

[9] Graham Ward, "The Erotics of Redemption—after Karl Barth," *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998): 52-72.

[10] E.g., James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

By the same token, I am struck by a parallel development on the "traditional" side, one that is also ignored by the TFSM. If the "revisionist" camp has "thinner" (witness the TFSM) and "thicker" (witness Robert Song's book) approaches to these matters, so too does the "traditionalist" camp.[11]

If one lumps *all* traditionalist books and arguments together, it is easier to assume that there is one monolithic—and hermeneutically and theologically thin—biblicist approach. One can easily find books on the traditionalist side, for instance, that read like a catalog of exegeses of different parts of the canon, any one of which (the reader infers) would be enough in the author's mind to shore up the contemporary ethical conclusion that the traditional view of marriage is correct.[12] But one can just as easily find richer efforts to discern a canonical logic in Scriptural, efforts that aren't so tied to a cumulative case but are, or seek to be, more attentive and responsive to what Brownson calls the deeper "moral logic" of Scriptural injunctions and affirmations.

Take, for instance, the book *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* by Christopher C. Roberts.[13] While that book is focused on luminaries from the Christian past (for instance, the "Cappadocian Fathers," Augustine, Aquinas, Blessed John Paul II, and others), Roberts pays significant attention to those figures' readings of Scripture.

He finds—to take one representative example—that Karl Barth reinforces the traditional male-and-female view of marriage by way of an exegetical fusion of Genesis 1-2 with Ephesians 5. Barth notes that Genesis 2:24 ("For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh") is quoted in Ephesians 5:31 and then, in 5:32, referred to God's eternal covenant with humanity: "This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church." For Barth, this

---

[11] Many books and essays might be mentioned here. There is the magisterial Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007) and Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008). But I think especially of Ephraim Radner, "The Nuptial Mystery: The Historical Flesh of Procreation," in Roy R. Jeal (ed.), *Human Sexuality and the Nuptial Mystery* (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), pp. 85-115 and his "cruciform" interpretation of the abiding significance of procreation in the Christian theology of marriage.

[12] I think here of theologically "conservative" books that are structured around the "big seven" proof texts (Genesis 1-2; 19; Leviticus 18, 20; Romans 1; 1 Corinthians 6; 1 Timothy 1). E.g., Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction* (Purcelville, VA: The Good Book Company, 2013); Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Ian Paul, *Same-Sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2014). All of the books mentioned here are good as far as they go; my point is that they don't go as far as they might have done.

[13] New York: T. & T. Clark/Continuum, 2007. Roberts helped facilitate the authoring and production the preparatory catechesis for the upcoming Roman Catholic World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in 2015, *Love is Our Mission: The Family Fully Alive* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2014), which reads like a popularization of *Creation and Covenant*.

redemptive covenant is the "internal basis" for God's creation of male-and-female marriage in the beginning. And this, in turn, allows Barth to say that the Old Testament envisioned marriage as a given but also that after the incarnation and the advent of the ministry of Jesus, celibacy becomes a recognizable vocation alongside marriage (cf. 1 Corinthians 7) insofar as it, too, can point to the covenantal union of Christ and the church. By living the life of the eschaton now (cf. Matthew 22:30), the celibate person, in Barth's view, witnesses to covenantal, redemptive relationality as well.

The plausibility of Barth's construal rests not on Genesis 1-2 alone, nor even on the surface meanings of Genesis read together with Ephesians, but more on the glimpse that these texts afford of a redemptive movement in which a lifelong covenantal bond (marriage), the fruit of that bond (procreation), and the foregoing of that bond (celibacy, for some) are held together in light of an overarching vision of creation's fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

My point, as earlier, is not so much to argue in favor or against such a reading of the biblical material. Rather, I simply want to note the bewildering and enticing fecundity of the "traditional" view—and to note its almost complete absence from the TFSM's paper. Neither the "revisionist" nor the "traditional" camps are static entities or simple "givens." Our interest in typologies and categorization ("Which view is the liberal one?" "What are the features of the conservative view?") may blind us to the way in which engagement with Scripture, whether on the more progressive or conservative side, is a never-finished task and one that is far more complex, demanding, and *interesting* than the TFSM's description might suggest. What's needed now, in our current crisis, is fresh attention to this material. We need better, deeper, more serious engagement with Scripture and its Christian interpreters—engagement that seeks the "face of the King," Scripture's unifying thread, as Irenaeus recommended. The invitation to such engagement lies open before us, and we are in danger of missing it, I fear.

Wesley