

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN *This Holy Estate*
TALKING POINTS FOR CONSULTATIONS IN THE DIOCESE OF ONTARIO

INTRODUCTION

“This Holy Estate” is the report submitted to the 2016 General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada by the Commission on the Marriage Canon.¹ The Commission “consisted of individuals who, in the view of the officers of the General Synod, demonstrated a capacity to hear and understand the theological diversity represented in the Anglican Church of Canada.” Part of its mandate was to prepare documentation demonstrating how “a change in the church’s traditional teaching on Christian marriage could be understood to be scripturally and theologically coherent.” (THE, p. 1).

As the diocesan Canon 21 Steering Committee it is our hope that these consultation sessions will help you as members of the Anglican Church of Canada in this diocese:

- 1. to understand what the report offers as a biblical rationale for making a change to the Marriage Canon “to allow the marriage of same-sex couples in the same way as opposite-sex couples;” (THE, p. 1)*
- 2. to arrive at your own opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of the biblical rationale presented in THE;*
- 3. to become more aware of our church's theological diversity on this issue.*

*The material below covered covers the major biblical texts that THE chose for discussion. Our introductory comments and discussion questions are set out in italics. Verbatim quotes from THE are set out in ‘plain font;’ and scriptural passages (NRSV) are set out in **bold**. While the extracts from THE are not exhaustive, they are meant to be representative.² Nevertheless, this discussion document is not intended as a substitute for the report itself, which is available online. Printed copies can also be obtained through the office of the Diocese of Ontario.*

1. THIS HOLY ESTATE ON THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Before turning to specific biblical passages, THE begins with a discussion of the concept of “the authority of scripture” and how it understands this term. As you can

¹ “This Holy Estate,” Report of the Commission on the Marriage Canon of the Anglican Church of Canada (Toronto: The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2015); abbreviated in this handout as *THE*. The entire report is available online at <https://www.anglican.ca/resources/this-holy-estate-the-report-of-the-commission-on-the-marriage-canon/>

² It should be noted that *THE* supports its arguments with numerous footnotes and references, for the sake of space only a few of those are reproduced in this précis

see, its preference was to find a “middle way” of scriptural interpretation in its attempt to understand what the Bible has to say about marriage.

‘Anglicans have lived with diverse approaches to scripture read and interpreted by the community in dialogue together. We do not have a consensus in this area.’ (*THE*, pp. 12-13) ... For some it is obvious that the Bible condemns all [same-sex] relationships, committed and covenanted or not. Citing the six texts condemning same-sex activity is held to be sufficient to make this argument.³...For other Anglicans, the Bible functions like a “heritage document” for the church. It belongs to a less enlightened time. At best, it provides a descriptive account of what people at a certain time and place believed, rather than a set of prescriptions for all times and places.’ (*THE*, p. 20)

‘What then do we mean when we talk about “the authority of scripture”? The *Windsor Report* suggests that phrase is shorthand for *God’s* authority exercised *through* Scripture as a means to directing, energizing, shaping, and uniting the church in its mission of witness to Jesus Christ.⁴ This exercise of authority does not trump our engagement; it pushes us deeper, often confounding the easy answers of liberals and conservatives alike.’ (*THE*, p. 21-22)

‘The approach we wish to take is thus recognizably Anglican in two important ways: first, while Scripture bears the final authority for the church, it does not do so apart from interpretation and application. No reading of scripture is “uninterpreted” apart from reason and tradition. No reading of Scripture can be abstracted from the life of the church and its struggle to embody the Gospel. Second, it recognizes Scripture as a text read (or perhaps better “performed”) primarily in community, in the context of the liturgy, rather than a text read privately in the context of one’s personal devotions on the one hand, or in the scholarly laboratory on the other. This is not to dismiss piety or scholarly work, provided they serve the primary purpose of the people discerning the call of God in and for the church.’ (*THE*, pp. 23-24)

‘Thus we take a *via media* approach to Scripture between one way which appeals to isolated texts as “proof” of a particular understanding of being biblical, and another which discards Scripture as a site for hearing any authoritative word that stands over against uncritically accepted and culturally derived ideas. By contrast, we are adopting a stance consonant with the broad approach to Scripture of the *Windsor Report*, which seeks to discern what faithful practice with regard to the question of same-sex marriage might look like in our Canadian context. It also accords with a

³ Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10. The condemnation of the men of Sodom (Genesis 19:4-5, also Judges 19:22) is also sometimes put forth as an example of the Bible’s negativity toward all same-sex relations.

⁴ The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report 2004* (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004), §55. Available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/68225/windsor2004full.pdf>

welcome shift in the use of Scripture by opponents of same-sex marriage away from the six “bullet” texts, which are then answered by those sympathetic to same-sex marriage, invariably generating more heat than light about the overall intent of God in sexuality and marriage within the biblical story.’⁵ (*THE*, p. 24)

Questions: Which of the three approaches to interpreting scripture mentioned in THE most accords with yours? Can we be in the same church and interpret the Bible differently?

2. MARRIAGE AND THE CREATION ACCOUNTS

Scholars often refer to the story of the six days of creation and the Sabbath in Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a and the story in Genesis 2:4b - 25 about the creation of man from the dust of the ground and the creation of woman from the rib of the man as two distinct creation accounts. In this section, the authors of THE conclude that neither of the creation accounts provide sufficient information to allow readers to clearly define the institution of marriage, let alone same-sex marriage.

So God created humankind [Heb *adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them [Heb *him*]; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

‘The writer of Genesis is criticising ancient near eastern royal ideologies that understood the king as image or representative of the divine. Genesis states that the entire human community, male and female, is created in God’s image. The image speaks of humans as created to extend God’s rule in creation, rather than humans as “looking like” God. Gender (“male and female”) therefore refers not to God, and so God’s image, as sexually differentiated, but to God’s call to humanity to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” While sexuality and procreation are implied as a means to fulfilling that commission, there is no explicit reference to marriage (nor to family) as a necessary agent of procreation. The full human community as *adam* (“male and female”) is responsible to fill the earth.’ (*THE*, p. 31)

For this reason a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

‘The explanatory comment, “for this reason a man...” (verse 24), which is the first mention of marriage in the Bible, is interesting for two immediate reasons. First, it makes no explicit reference to procreation as part of the intent for marriage. The need the Creator fulfills in making the woman is the aloneness of the *adam*, and is

⁵ For an example of answering these six texts, see Charles D. Myers, “Homosexuality and the Bible: A Consideration of Pertinent Passages,” <http://covnetpres.org/2005/05/homosexuality-and-the-bible>

met by companionship (Genesis 2:18). It is only after eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that the man names his wife Eve, “mother of the living,” limiting her role no longer as equal partner but as subordinate, procreative vessel. Second, normally in the life of ancient Israel it was the woman (rather than the man) who left her parents to be joined to her husband. This leaves open the question of how the comment [in v. 24] is to be applied to the “institution” of marriage in Israel, especially given “how few marriages in the Old Testament, if any, conform to Genesis 2:24.”⁶ Whether Genesis 2:24 was intended to be a normative statement about the particular form of marriage is not clear. That the voice in the text is that of the narrator (rather than God) supports the statement as being descriptive rather than prescriptive.’ (*THE*, p. 32)

Question: *The conclusion of the authors of THE is that neither of the creation accounts contains information that allows readers to clearly define the institution of marriage. Do you agree?*

3. MARRIAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In Christian theology, texts that have often been used as the basis for a doctrine of marriage include Mark 10 and Ephesians 5. The authors of THE examine both texts. They conclude, however, that Jesus is not using the creation accounts in Genesis to articulate a timeless doctrine of marriage. Moreover, in their opinion, it is the relationship between Christ and the church that has to define the nature of human marriage, not the reverse.

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ ³He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ ⁴They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ ⁵But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” ⁷“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ (Mark 10:2-10; see also Matthew 19:1-9)

‘Jesus, in Mark 10:1-10 and Matthew 19:1-9, combines the two creation accounts in discussing the question of divorce. Quoting Deuteronomy 24:1, where Moses is said to acknowledge the convention of granting a certificate of divorce, Jesus observes this as an accommodation to human brokenness (Mark 10:5). If the two as “male

⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage: Old Testament and Ancient Near East.” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, volume 4, edited by David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), page 560.

and female” are “one flesh” in marriage, then divorce is a violation of the Creator’s intent (Mark 10:9). What lies behind the question of the Pharisees (which is phrased as *peirazō*—the same as the temptations of the devil in Mark 1:13, and the question about Caesar’s taxes in 12:15) is the prophetic denunciation by John the Baptist of Herod’s “unlawful” marriage of his brother’s divorced wife (Mark 6:18).

‘Jesus refuses to be entrapped, and yet also refuses to make a new law; rather, he challenges the “hardness of heart” reflected in both casual and utilitarian practices of divorce and remarriage in the Hellenistic world. Jesus is therefore not stating a timeless doctrine of marriage, but rather giving a pastoral (and political) response to a particular set of practices.’ (*THE*, p. 33)

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ ³²This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:25-32)

‘Like Jesus, the apostle Paul’s teaching on marriage invokes Genesis 1:27 and 2:27. However, the former passage is subjected to “Christological *discipline*” in Galatians 3:28 in that the new humanity is no longer humanity as “male and female,” but humanity as “in Christ Jesus.”⁷ The divine image is restored in a way that opens the possibility of Christian relationships beyond the power-differentiated “male and female” and “Jew and Greek” and “slave and free”—corrupted human relationships which have claimed to exclusively reflect God’s image to the world.

‘In Ephesians 5, the Genesis 2 passage is given Christological *expansion* in that “the two shall become one flesh” is fulfilled in the mystery of Christ and the church. Marriage reflects that mystery not simply in procreation, but in its witness to love of neighbour. “Ephesians is not saying that we should take our understanding of Christ and the church from how our marriages work. It says that we should understand marriage from Christ and the church”⁸.’ (*THE*, pp. 33-34)

⁷ Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, Cynthia B. Kittredge, and Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View From the Liberals,” in *Anglican Theological Review*, volume 93, number 1 (Winter 2011), page 70. Emphasis added.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 71.

Questions: If THE thinks that we should understand human marriage based on Christ's relationship with the church, what should a human marriage look like? Does Mark 10 have anything to contribute to this vision?

4. ROMANS 1 AND THE QUESTION OF NATURAL LAW

Romans 1 is one of the six biblical texts (mentioned above) that are often cited as proof that there is no room for same-sex marriage in the Church. In their discussion, the authors of THE call into question how we should understand Paul's appeals to "nature."

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27)

'Several submissions to the commission made reference to Romans 1 as invoking a natural law argument, calling both male and female same-sex relationships a perversion of natural law or creation order. A more detailed treatment of Paul's argument is beyond the scope of this report, though is readily available elsewhere.⁹

'There are three points that may be agreed upon regardless of one's view on same-sex marriage. First, the particular language Paul is drawing upon ("natural intercourse" in Romans 1:26-27) is different from the popular "It's not natural!" sentiments often expressed as a gut-level revulsion at the mention of (usually male) same-sex practices. Since revulsions are socially and psychologically formed, they are unreliable as pointers to natural order. By contrast, for some people same-sex attraction is the most "natural" thing, and to contemplate physical desire toward a member of the opposite sex would feel "unnatural."

'Second, for Paul "contrary to nature" is not necessary a synonym for "sinful." For instance, the term "contrary to nature" (*para physin*) is also used later in Romans to speak of the grace of God, *para physin*, in grafting Gentiles "as a wild olive branch" onto the cultivated tree ("natural branches") of Israel (11:17, 21).

⁹ James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

‘Third, Paul’s concern in the passage is not sexuality, but self-righteousness. Indeed, his use of such diatribe is a very specific strategy within Romans to attack the usual ways people see themselves as more righteous than others. New Testament scholar Richard Hays identifies Paul’s purpose as “a homiletical sting operation” in order to show how “self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as homosexual behaviour itself.”¹⁰ Put another way, Paul is attacking the “holier-than-thou” people of his day who claim that “others” (Gentiles) need the grace of God more than they (Jews).’ (*THE*, pp. 35-36)

Question: Biblical scholars generally agree that Paul’s central concern in Romans 1 is not human sexuality; it is idolatry. When does human sexuality become symptomatic of idolatry?

5. MODELS FOR SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: ACTS 10 AND SAME-SEX COVENANTS AS A DIFFERENTIATED FORM OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE COVENANT (*THE* §5.3.3)

Following from the conclusion that there is a biblical rationale for same-sex marriage, the authors of THE also identify a biblical model that might inform the church as it seeks for a liturgical response that acknowledges both the similarities and differences between heterosexual and same-sex marriage. They find it in Acts 10.

‘We require an analogy strong enough to express a shared, even substantive, *identity* between same- and opposite-sex relationships. And we require an analogy clear enough to respect the *difference* between same- and opposite-sex relationships, while retaining the same covenantal language. A well-formulated analogy in our case will illumine and affirm both the uniqueness and the relatedness of same- and opposite-sex relationships.’ (*THE*, p. 52)

‘The question is not whether or not same-sex relationships are marriage, in some absolute, abstract sense. It is, rather, about the possibility that same-sex couples may be adopted into an existing institution of Christian marriage, enriching and expanding its meaning, yet without denying its previous meaning. A theological analogy to this process of adoption is that of the inclusion of the Gentiles within the original covenant with Israel. Acts 10 has been invoked to support the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church. The two situations show significant structural parallels that may provide us with a model to think both full inclusion and distinct identity together: In both cases there is a long history in which it was believed that a particular grace was given only to one group of people to the exclusion of others:

¹⁰ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), page 389. It should be noted that for Hays, crucial to Paul’s argument is the assumption that his readers would have agreed that homosexual behaviour was “against nature.”

- In both cases there is a recognition that God’s grace is broader than we had assumed, and that those who had been excluded are now being invited in:
- The “adoption” or “grafting in” is seen as on some level contrary to nature (*para physin*, Romans 11:24), yet nonetheless is of God;
- The task for the church in both cases is to discern whether this reorientation to greater inclusivity stems from a genuine movement of the Spirit;
- In both cases this inclusion is not completely on the same terms as the original group: as Gentiles are not called to observe Torah, so same-sex marriages do not share in precisely the same tradition of sexual expression (and its symbolic import) as heterosexual marriage;
- They do nonetheless share in the fundamental nature of the same covenanted grace (in the case of Acts 10 the covenant with God, in the present context the covenant of partners as a reflection of this primary covenant);
- Finally, the inclusion of the new group does not invalidate the earlier covenant as wrong or no longer relevant; like the Torah, the original understanding of the heterosexual structure of marriage, rooted in the creation accounts in Genesis, remains fully in effect for those to whom it applies. (*THE*, pp. 52-54)

‘One might object to this parallel that the inclusion of the Gentiles is a salvation-historical event of unique significance, such that not every proposal for inclusion can be equated with it. Indeed, it is important to note the centrality of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to the redemptive work of Christ, and the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:11-22). Yet the unique significance of the inclusion of the Gentiles does not mean it cannot continue to echo as a type or analogy of Christ’s ongoing work of reconciliation and inclusion in the life of the church. The church does not need to discern that same-sex marriage is an event of equal importance to the inclusion of the Gentiles, but it does need to discern whether it is a consequent development of the same redemptive action of Christ. In practical terms, it seems to us that this theological understanding would be compatible with the revision of the canon to include same-sex couples (as called for in the resolution of the General Synod). It would suggest a liturgy that allows for variation in the theological background and symbolism between same- and opposite-sex marriages, while retaining identical core texts, such as the vows.’ (*THE*, pp. 54-55)

Question: If both heterosexual and same-sex marriages can equally reflect the element of self-giving that characterizes Christ’s relationship to the church (Ephesians 5), does the call in THE for a somewhat distinct liturgy for the marriage of same-sex persons make sense?