

**Augustine, Scripture, and eschatology: a reply to the ATR's
respondents**
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As part of its “Conversation on Marriage and the Church,” the *Anglican Theological Review* solicited three responses to the paper “Marriage in Creation and Covenant: a Response to the Task Force on the Study of Marriage,” by John Bauerschmidt, Wesley Hill, Jordan Hylden, and me. As one of its authors, I would like to begin by thanking the three respondents, Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, Scott MacDougall, and Kathryn Tanner, for their substantive comments. This sort of dialogue on marriage is all too rare.

I want to acknowledge the substantive character of the issues raised by our respondents, not least those that we did not address in our first essay. Of course, we could not say everything all at once, and we have begun the project *Fully Alive: Love, Marriage, and the Christian Body* to explore a great variety of issues. I can only ask for patience and continued help or engagement, as we engage in these tasks. At the same time, it seems necessary to reply on some matters, not least because our respondents have asked questions.

Common objections: Scripture, Augustine

All three respondents note the prominence we give to Ephesians 5, yet they worry we misunderstand its import regarding how marriage is a *sacrament* or icon of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Our scriptural claim, however, was much broader. None of the respondents spends time on the “foundational” prominence we gave to the creation narratives and their “canonical placement” as the opening to Scripture (MCC 13), yet these passages highlight the significance of sexual difference to any theology of marriage. Nor do our respondents note that marriage and the marital relationship are repeatedly and explicitly an image for the union between God and Israel, and Christ and the Church (e.g. Ezek. 16; Jer. 2:2; Hosea 1-2; Isa. 62:5; Matt. 22:1-14; Matt. 25:1-13; Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7-9, 21:2, 21:9). The image did not originate with, and cannot be settled by appeal to, one scriptural author; it is a golden thread running through the whole Bible. Thus, one cannot object to our position simply by asserting that the thread of Paul’s argument in Ephesians 5 runs *from* marriage *to* the Christ/Church relationship.

Furthermore, such an argument cannot even be made about Ephesians 5. MacDougall attempts to dismiss our account by appealing to the “plain sense of the text,” as well as to Ian MacFarland’s (and the task force’s) view of it. But the view of MacDougall and the task force seems based primarily on the misleading translation of the NRSV: “This is a great mystery, and *I am applying it* to Christ and the Church.” On the other hand, MacFarland’s article rightly notes that Paul reasons back and forth between the two relationships. Rather than beginning with marriage and then applying it to Christ and the Church, most of Ephesians 5:22-30 reasons in the other direction, *from* the relationship of Christ and the Church *to* marriage. Only after doing so does Paul quote a particular biblical passage (Gen. 2:21) and say: “This is a great mystery, and I speak about Christ and the Church.”¹

All three respondents also returned to Augustine, whose work is the primary font of Western nuptial theology.⁴ Before I address their concerns about our reading of Augustine, I should note that we did not invoke Augustine alone, but we noted a whole Western *tradition* on marriage that takes Augustine as paradigmatic, pointing to a few key publications that offer further details.⁵ We could not write at length on over 1,400 years’ worth of literature. In many ways, this point answers each of the respondents’ attempts to re-read Augustine and come up

¹ τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν. ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν / *Sacramentum hoc magnum est; ego autem dico de Christo et ecclesia.*

with counterproposals. Our paper never asked “Did Augustine say x about marriage?” We raised the issue of “What does the Western Augustinian tradition *say as a whole* about marriage, and what is thus a credible retrieval of that whole tradition?” We believe we provided a coherent answer to the latter. But I shall still respond to some of their objections.

Perhaps the most basic issue is whether, for Augustine, marriage is primarily instituted for procreation. I acknowledge the difficulty of pinning him down on this topic, but this is mostly because he tends to list multiple primary goods, not just one. As he says in *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 11, marriage was not established only for children or fidelity, but also for “a certain sacrament” or “a certain bond” (*quoddam sacramentum*), referring to Ephesians 5:32. A broad reading of Augustine’s work shows that he hopes to find all three goods of marriage, ideally, which is why he works to show that all three are present in the union of Mary and Joseph, as Tanner notes.

That said, our respondents did not consider Augustine’s statements about children as *a* or even *the* primary good of marriage and sex. Such a position can be found in the first chapter of *On the Good of Marriage*, when Augustine comments on the significance of sexual difference:

What follows from this is the connection of fellowship in children, who are the only honorable fruit, not of the union of male and female, but of sexual intercourse. For there could have been a kind of friendly and real union between either sex, one ruling and the other following, without such intercourse.²

In other words, Augustine can imagine a kind of orderly human relationship or social union without sex, but he cannot imagine the institution of sex in marriage without its orientation towards children.

Similarly, Augustine labels procreative intercourse “the purpose for which marriage takes place” and labels it the only intercourse “worthy of marriage” (*On the Good of Marriage*, 8 and 11) and “the proper end of marriage” (*On Marriage and Concupiscence* 16). In the course of naming the fundamental divine acts in creation and redemption, Augustine mentions that God “instituted the union of male and female to serve the propagation of offspring” (*City of God* 7.30). It seems that when Augustine describes the ends of marriage in an abbreviated fashion, he tends to mention offspring alone. When he describes them at length, he mentions other goods as well. This may be a case of a primary end and two secondary ends. But there should be no doubt that Augustine views children as one of the primary purposes for which marriage was instituted, one of its inherent goals, and the only final purpose for the institution of sex.

This is where Joslyn-Siemiatkoski's account founders. His proposal relies on minimizing the Augustinian good of offspring and considering it separately from the goods of fidelity and the sacramental bond, such that if faithful union is present, children or an intent regarding children need not be (“Another Look at Augustine,” 3). But the three Augustinian goods are not so easily separable. The birth and nurture of children are oriented towards the broader ends of human fellowship and society, but marital fidelity and permanence are *also* ordered towards the bearing of offspring in Augustine's account. For him (among others), it is clear that a married man and woman who engage in sexual intercourse over many years will, in the overwhelming majority of cases, conceive, unless they are unfaithful to each other, they do not render the marital “debt” (1 Cor. 7:1-5), or they attempt to prevent conception or birth by various means.³ Augustine accounts for unforeseen circumstances like infertility, barrenness, or the illness or death of one of the spouses, however, not least by invoking the mysterious

² *On the Good of Marriage* 1: *Consequens est conexio societatis in filiis, qui unus honestus fructus est non coniunctionis maris et feminae, sed concubitus. Poterat enim esse in utroque sexu etiam sine tali commixtione alterius regentis, alterius obsequentis amicalis quaedam et germana coniunctio.*

³ *On the Good of Marriage* 5, 6; *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, pp. 17, 19.

judgment of God. It is God who gives or withholds fruitfulness to heterosexual couples, even as he gives or withholds fruitfulness to the fertile soil (1 Cor. 3:5-9). He has "woven into human bodies" the ability to propagate by the union of male and female (*City of God* 22.24), but the results are not guaranteed. It is within this context also that we should locate the statement in the BCP's exhortation that marriage is instituted for children "when God wills," not within a naturalistic understanding of infertility or aging.

The difficulty of applying Augustine's three goods to same-sex marriage comes precisely here. The ability to propagate is not present in the unions of same-sex couples: as they are constitutionally incapable of procreating together, they must involve a third party or, more likely, a whole host of other persons and processes. Children are not simply an outgrowth of their fidelity and permanence, but only come through conscripting someone foreign to an otherwise exclusive union, a breaking of *fides*.

MacDougall on eschatology

In our paper, we contended that some accounts of same-sex unions attempt to downplay the present significance of sexual difference by appealing to eschatology. Unfortunately, I think MacDougall has partially misunderstood us on this point. He thinks that our objection was based on a sense that the Augustinian tradition "prohibits extoling an eschatological imagination in which gender becomes less relevant" ("Three Questions," 4-5). We were not, at this time, making a direct claim about the eschatological significance of gender or sexual difference, though this is indeed a concern for Augustine and within the mainstream of the Western tradition.⁴ Rather, we criticized any unwarranted attempt to skip past the present to the future by dodging an account of creation or history through vague appeals to eschatology. Sadly, this is precisely what MacDougall has done, minimizing our criteria for ethical discernment around marriage. This principle is deeply flawed, especially if it is wielded uncritically, without grounding in specific scriptural narratives and prescriptions. Our Lord's teaching on marriage and divorce was not limited by reference to either creation or last things, but to both (Matt. 19:3-8, 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27). When it came to regulating present marriage, our current concern, it is notable that Christ's emphasis lay on the initial creation. We can only follow suit, even though the Christian life must always be led in light of the coming resurrection, not least through a valuation of celibacy.

Tanner's charges

Kathryn Tanner offers the most trenchant critique of "Marriage in Creation and Covenant," purporting to show that our argument has no foundation in either Scripture or the tradition. I have already addressed some of her concerns, but others remain.

Tanner objects to our emphasis on procreation because she thinks it does not correspond well to the bond between Christ and the Church. First, she makes the somewhat odd claim that, when speaking of the sacrament of marriage, we "associate the male-female procreative bond as a whole with Christ and their offspring with the Church" ("A Rejoinder," 2). Tanner is simply mistaken, though this was more an implicit than an explicit commitment in our paper. The claim we make is more complicated and yet perhaps more obvious: we associate the male with Christ but the female *and* the offspring with the Church. The Church is one and many, both the Bride of Christ and, in her members, his children. We agree with Tanner that "the Church just *is* what Christ's love generates" (*ibid.*), but she fails to reckon with the full ramifications of this phrase. Christ generates the corporate body and the members.

Tanner also claims that she is unaware of any claim in Scripture and tradition that Christ and the Church have offspring. I was actually somewhat surprised by this claim. The biblical foundations for such a view are not hard to find. Within the New Testament, Paul

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

refers to “the Jerusalem above; she is free and she is a mother. For it is written, ‘Rejoice you childless one ... (Gal. 4:26-27). He is here citing Isaiah 54:1, a passage whose context makes it clear that the barren Israel will be married and bear children from her Maker. Several of the passages I have cited above, along with others, refer to Israel or Jerusalem as a mother with children: that is, a corporate body with her individual members or citizens (Ps.87:5; Isa. 54:1-8; Ezek. 16:20-21, 43b-49; Lam. 1:5; Hosea 1:2-2:1). Although Scripture is not explicitly descriptive regarding the procreative relationship between Christ and the Church (unless one counts the Song of Songs: let the reader understand), Tanner’s point about Christ and the Church *not* having children by procreation is hardly obvious. Yes, we are *adopted* children (e.g. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). But we are also “born of God” (John 1:13), “born anew, not of perishable but imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23; cf. 1 John 3:9).

Within the tradition, this sort of language is incredibly common. Basic imagery regarding the Church as our mother is easily found among the Church Fathers and the Reformers, as Carl E. Braaten has noted.⁵ More specifically, the imagery of Christ and the Church dwelling in a holy, fruitful union with children is discussed by Jerome in his *Commentary on Isaiah* 62:5.⁶ Similarly, Augustine takes it for granted that Christ and the Church have children; his imagery is not limited to that of adoption, as Tanner seems to think.⁷ Augustine does not argue for this point; it is uncontroversial. He states:

Two parents begot us for death, two parents begot us for life. The parents who begot us for death are Adam and Eve. The parents who begot us for life are Christ and the Church. (*Sermon* 22.265-267)

The image of “Mother Church” became incredibly common from at least the fifth century onwards throughout the Church, as did baptism as a reference to the Church’s “womb,” though both are present before.⁸ Similarly, in commenting on John 16:21 (“When a woman is giving birth, she is sorrowful”), the Venerable Bede says, “He refers to holy Church as a woman on account of her fruitfulness in good works and because she never ceases to beget spiritual children for God.” This begetting is compared to the “yeast” hidden by the woman in the meal (Luke 13:21), which is obtained by “the energy of love and faith from on high” (*Homily* II.13).

Finally, Tanner is concerned that we link marriage with the cross and passion of Christ, as well as creation. “The crucifixion need not make an appearance here,” she says (6). Moreover, the link we argue for somehow amounts to Christ “creating us for suffering’s sake” (7).

Regarding the former, Tanner is mistaken in her suggestion that we can remove the crucifixion from a theology of marriage and its sacramental character, even if she is concerned about how it may be linked to creation. Frankly, the context of Ephesians 5:32 will not allow it. The love that husbands must show their wives is precisely that exhibited by Christ in the drama of salvation: “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies” (Eph. 5:25,

⁵ *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (1998), 2-3.

⁶ “As a youth dwells with a virgin, so shall your sons dwell with you. And it will come to pass that, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so shall the Lord rejoice over you.” Among others: Ps. 19:5; Ps. 45:9; 2 Cor. 11:2.

⁷ Tanner, “A Rejoinder,” p. 2. Her point here is unclear, as she seems to both grant and deny the point about “spiritual procreation.”

⁸ E.g. for the former, see Cassiodorus *Commentary on the Psalms* (throughout). For the latter, see Leo the Great, *Sermon* 24.3, 25.5, 63.6; Quodvultdeus, *On the Creed* 3.1.1-8. Robin Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*. Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 105 (Leiden and Danvers, MA: Brill, 2011), pp. 249-251. Even more explicit language regarding “the seed of Christ” or “the seed” of baptismal water is noted by Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 240, 321, 666. I leave aside its ubiquitous use among heretical authors.

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Tanner's concern about suffering, however, is both more serious and more difficult. If we truly made a link that imported suffering into eternity and our final salvation, I too would be concerned! I agree with Tanner that God did not create us "for suffering's sake."

It seems that Tanner is concerned with the connection between the following statements. We posited that "God created a world that he foreordained to draw to fulfillment in himself" (MCC 12). We said "No fundamental opposition stands between nature and grace, creation and covenant" (MCC 11), and we spoke of marriage as a natural and a sacramental reality (MCC 12). We also highlighted marriage's participation in the nuptial mystery of Christ and the Church, linking procreation and labor to this mystery (MCC 3). We later added a point about "suffering procreative love," that is, the natural good of marriage as it is expressed and experienced in the face of mortality, sin, and finitude (MCC 16). If one were to reason backwards in a particular way, one might stress the link between marriage's natural and sacramental reality further than we did. But we were not asserting precisely this sort of link. Perhaps we could have been clearer on this point in our original paper. But allow me to clarify my own position.

As a sacrament, marriage reflects the union of Christ and the Church, and it is clear from Ephesians 5 that this reflection is based upon the character of the one-flesh union of a man and a woman. We might imagine that, in a world without sin, this union and love would be expressed apart from suffering; it would not bear the cruciform shape of Ephesians 5, which we highlighted in our paper. This is what Augustine tries to imagine in his "blushingly prurient" investigation, as Tanner puts it (6). But *this is not* a world without sin and its effects, nor do we know of one. God's *caritas* towards us is revealed in the self-offering of the Son upon the Cross; the act that unites Christ and the Church forever was not accomplished without suffering. And we cannot expect a marriage that partakes of this love to be free of the Cross, not in this world.

This is not a denial that marriage involves pleasure, of course. We are not naive. And Christ's betrothal of the Church to himself, as well as his current union with it, is not without pleasure and rejoicing (cf. Heb. 12:2). But to fail to account for suffering in our understanding of marriage as a sacrament, to imagine that we can write a theology of marriage that pole-vaults into a realm free of suffering, is misguided. Along with the whole creation that "groans in labor pains right up to the present time," we "groan inwardly" and still await the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22, 23). "Who hopes for what they already see?" (Rom 8:24).

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning, I am grateful for the engagement of our three respondents. We need this sort of substantive debate, rather than a quiet slide into new practices and theologies. However much we may feel we intuit the holy character of same-sex unions, the task of rigorously explaining and justifying such a practice, as well as reconciling it with Scripture and tradition, cannot be avoided.

For my part and that of the other authors in *Fully Alive*, we will continue our work of slowly addressing the various topics we and others have outlined. So far as it lies with us, we cannot lack energy or motivation at this time. Past, present, and future generations deserve our best. We thus pray to the Lord for inspiration, drive, and focus, for ourselves and for those joining us in holy conversation.