

Same-sex complementarity: A theology of marriage

by [Eugene R. Rogers Jr.](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue



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A year ago the bishops of the Episcopal Church received a 95-page report by eight theologians to provide the church with a "theology of same-sex relationships." (The report was published in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Anglican Theological Review*.) As you might expect, the panel split into two parties, "traditionalist" and "liberal."

What you might not expect—if you follow such debates in mainline Protestant bodies—was how the sides began to meet. Certain familiar arguments disappeared. New arguments took their place. And some of the new arguments converged in ways their authors perhaps had not intended.

For example, the traditionalist report avoided sociological arguments about the sexual practices of gay men, nor did it offer an exegetical argument from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nor did it focus on Romans 1, arguably the one biblical passage that still carries weight on the issue. Antigay arguments, that is, had disappeared. Instead, the traditionalists chose a positive focus on Genesis 1—"male and female created he them." Officially, their argument stressed the conditions for procreation. Yet it also made room for aged or infertile heterosexual couples to marry, giving others to think that being able to procreate supported rather than defined that vision of marriage. The primary issue for traditionalists, one might conclude, boiled down to male-female as an icon of creation. The case rested on two genders conceived as complementary, as fitting together.

On the liberal side, references to "rights" remained historical. The word *equality* appeared not at all, except in a reference to the Philippians hymn about how Jesus "counted equality not a thing to be grasped." And appeals to individual experience ("As a gay man, I . . .") disappeared as well. Rather—as the conservative Presbyterian Thomas Gillespie wrote afterward—"the genius of the liberal proposal" lay "in its definition of marriage as both a 'discipline' and a 'means of grace' modeled on 'the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church'" and "its expansion of this 'sacrament' to include same-sex couples." That is, these "liberals" treated marriage as a discipline of sanctification rather than a means of satisfaction. They made a *lex orandi* argument from the marriage rite of the Book of Common Prayer—a rite that draws on the gendered language of Ephesians 5 about Christ and the church.

Because the language is gendered, it might hardly seem a promising passage for liberals. But as I hope to show (as a member of the committee that drafted that part of the report), it leads to a rich biblical understanding of how same-sex couples can image the faithfulness of God.

Despite the dismissals of bishops and others who thought that the divide between the panel's theologians meant that nothing had changed, the two sides had unwittingly converged. "The mystery of male and female is a profound one," the author of Ephesians writes, commenting on the passage in Genesis, "and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." It appears that, for both sides, their new disagreement turns on the mystery of Christ and the church, what icons can image them and what "male and female" means for Christians.

In both Galatians and Ephesians, the New Testament writer subjects "male and female" to what Stanley Hauerwas has called christological discipline. "In Christ there is no 'male and female,'" says Galatians 3:28, interpreting Genesis. Ephesians too subordinates Genesis to Christ in describing how a man leaves his mother and father and is joined to his wife: "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the church" (5:32). Ephesians makes Christ and the church the realities referred to, husband and wife the signs that refer. It interprets male-and-female typologically, as an icon or symbol, even if the symbol participates in what it represents. In the words of the wedding rite, the covenant of marriage "signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his church." The analogy recognizes Christ and the church as the realities, not male and female gender. Male and female point to something else.

In this light, same-sex marriage raises the question whether two women or two men can signify the relationship of Christ and the church. Ephesians presents that as a typological and a moral matter. As types, the spouses represent the love of God and God's people. In morals, they practice love of neighbor. Ephesians frames the mystery of Christ and the church with paraphrases of "love your neighbor as yourself": "He who loves his wife loves himself, for no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of one body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself." The mystery opens and closes with neighbor love. "Marriage," the panel wrote, "bears witness to both of the great commandments: it signifies the love of God and it teaches love of neighbor."

That's even more important if, following Ephesians, we take marriage as an ascetic discipline, a particular way of practicing love of neighbor. The vows do this: "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." Those ascetic vows—which Russian theologians compare to the vows of monastics—commit the couple to carry forward the solidarity of God and God's people. Marriage makes a school for virtue, where God prepares the couple for life with himself by binding them for life to each other.

Marriage, in this view, is for sanctification, a means by which God can bring a couple to himself by turning their limits to their good. And no conservative I know has seriously argued that same-sex couples need sanctification any *less* than opposite-sex couples do. (Hauerwas has argued it jocularly.)

Assume for the sake of argument that two men or two women can represent Christ and the church morally, as trainees in neighbor love: can they represent it sacramentally? Does it take a man to represent Christ and a woman to represent the church?

Something about symbols resists change, because they carry the social meanings by which members of societies think. Anthropologists of religion find it naive to imagine that we can change our symbols at will. In *Natural Symbols*, Mary Douglas observes that societies regularly conceptualize the world in binary oppositions—day and night, sun and moon, male and female—even if each society constructs those oppositions in its own way. Gender may vary with body shape, psychosexual identity and sexual

orientation—and the queer theorist Judith Butler can still insist that we cannot "freeze, banish, render useless or deplete of meaning" terms like male and female. We can only "continue to use them . . . to displace them from contexts where they have become instruments of oppressive power." Otherwise they sink underground, where they continue to exercise power in hidden ways.

Liberals have argued that gay and lesbian people are not going away. Conservatives might agree with queer theorists that male and female are not going away either. But Christian traditions still have surprising things to teach us about how to expand the terms *male* and *female*—how to displace them from contexts in which they confine the realities of Christ and the church.

Though Christian typology has long gendered the church as female—as in Ephesians 5—this has never restricted the church to women. The church has always admitted male and female members. The history of male leadership only seals the case that the church, though gendered as female, may permit men to represent it. It does not take a woman to represent the church. The church is always Christ's bride, but her members are female and male.

As for Christ, orthodox theology makes him fully human and fully divine. As God, Christ occupies neither gender, since God is the source of it all. As the medieval axiom goes, God is not in a category, *Deus non est in genere*. The corollary reads like a translation: "God is not in a gender." Thus the seventh-century Council of Toledo could insist that the first person of the Trinity "gave birth" to the preexistent, heavenly Christ "from the womb of the Father."

Graham Ward has noticed that the maleness of Jesus is a curious thing. Lacking a human father, Jesus received no humanly produced Y chromosome, and yet he is circumcised. The Middle Ages has much to teach us about the maleness of Jesus as well. The language of Cistercian piety called Jesus the mother of monks. Male priests invited male monks to suck milk from Jesus' breasts. They urged them to crawl into the wound in his side, the better to enter his womb. That was how to be born again in the Middle Ages—from the womb of Jesus. Medieval authors never wavered from using masculine pronouns for Jesus, nor did they confine him to masculine images. Christ could be all to all. Christ was the bridegroom to women and to men. Indeed Christ's body, if male in Jesus, was female in the church.

Although the church has often used typology to enforce gender roles, the logic of typology opens roles up—because any gender can represent a type. This is part of the mystery: Christ has never been the bridegroom for women alone and the church has never been a bride composed only of men.

Consider that in the Middle Ages an abbot could be gendered male, as a physical man; female, as a member of the church; male again, as a priest; female again, as a mother of monks; and female at prayer, as a soul before God. The complementarity theory of male and female turns out to be distinctively modern in confining a person to one gender—and to that extent untraditional. In the Middle Ages, gender could vary according to the greater reality represented.

Granted, medieval gender had features that no one would want to retain. It treated women as defective, and it allowed them to suffer disproportionately from men's sometimes self-serving suggestion that they regard their suffering as Christlike (whereas Christ overturned hierarchy in giving his life for his bride—the opposite of suttee). In the question at issue—does gender confine Christ?—the answer must be no. Christ, as God, is source and consummator of all gender. Christ, as human, assumes humanity, not maleness. Otherwise, he leaves women out of salvation—if "what is not assumed is not redeemed." Or else Jesus needed a woman to complete himself.

To sum up: Ephesians does not require heterosexual complementarity, even if it uses gendered language. A critic has called this interpretation "a refusal to see the obvious." But that's true only if gendered language requires gendered representation. And it doesn't. Otherwise, only women could lead a church gendered as female, and only men could be children of God on the pattern of God's Son. But that's absurd. We do permit men to represent the church, and we do admit women as children of God. An inflexible interpretation of gender confines the reading of scripture, restricts the resources of tradition, ignores the data of creation and reduces salvation to absurdity.

The mystery of Ephesians reaches deeper than that, into the mystery (rather than the superficial obviousness) of creation: the mystery that I am made for God, an Other not my own, a Good that exceeds my grasp, a Beauty beyond my control. "Male and female" exemplifies but does not exhaust that mystery—it images it. "Marriage," the panel wrote, "becomes a means by which God may bring a couple to himself, by exposing them to each other: They may grow into the love of God, by

practicing the love of nearest neighbor." Same-sex spouses find this other—their moral complement—in someone of the same sex. They find in someone of the same sex the right spur to moral growth. For some men, to leave father and mother and cleave to a wife would evade that challenge. Some women, conversely, must leave father and mother and cleave to a wife, to find themselves signs of Christ and the church. They fit together as those who make each other better, to exemplify the love of God and God's people. This is no rigid complementarity. It is a christologically disciplined complementarity.

Galatians states the underlying principle: "In Christ there is no longer 'male and female.'" It's worth noticing Paul's conjunctions. "There is neither Jew *nor* Greek, there is neither slave *nor* free, there is no longer 'male *and* female': for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Paul links the first two pairs of the series with *nor* (*oude*). He links the final pair, "male and female," with *and* (*kai*). That's because Paul preserves the wording of Genesis ("male *and* female") with care. It is not gender as such that Paul denies. He does not deny that in Christ there are women and men. Paul denies that gender is final. Precisely because Christ is the all, the omega, there can also be "no 'male and female,'" where that means a final, compulsory, exhaustive ending of one in the other. It is only Christ who satisfies the desire of every living thing (Ps. 145:16). Christ trains—or orients—all desire to God. Saying there is "no 'male and female'" denies, therefore, strong forms of the complementarity theory, according to which a woman remains incomplete without a man or a man incomplete without a woman. That theory, taken to its logical conclusion, effectively denies the Christ in whom all things are "summed up" (Eph. 1:10).

"No 'male and female'" also reminded the early church of the examples of Jesus and Paul. They both kept mixed company without needing completion by someone of the opposite sex. Their recorded words never connected marriage with procreation. Jesus was born from a woman alone (as God made Eve from a man alone). The early church used such examples to defend Christianity's most shocking departure from Late Antique morals—the founding of monasteries. Chrysostom noted that the command to "be fruitful and multiply" continued with another clause, "and fill the earth"—from which he concluded, already in the fourth century, that the commandment had been fulfilled.

All this presses the question: Do bodies still matter? Same-sex couples know that bodies matter, because they find themselves committed to someone of the opposite

(if not the opposite) sex. Transgender people know that bodies matter, because they find themselves choosing hormones and surgery. Parents know that bodies matter, because they find themselves with child. The sexuality debates do not teach us that bodies don't matter. They teach us that bodies matter in more ways than one. A christological account of gender gives bodies more, not fewer, ways to matter. Because the body of the medieval Christ both retains his circumcision and gains a womb, Christ resembles an intersex person. Because the body of Christ is male in the history of Jesus and female in the history of the church, Christ resembles a transsexual person. Because Christ can be the bridegroom to a male believer, he resembles the same-sex spouse. Gender does not limit Christ, because he is its Lord.

If Christ orients all desire to himself to satisfy every living thing, then it finally becomes clear what a sexual orientation must be. "Like other natural aptitudes," the panel wrote, "a sexual orientation is a christological condition; it shapes our ways of participating in the body of Christ." In sexual orientation, Christ trains "desire Godward through various capacities to desire others." The Spirit hovers over the waters of the womb "to prepare us for particular patterns of invitation to put our bodies on the line for others." Sexual orientation (gay or straight) names an aptitude for turning a limit to the good in our sexual lives, for practicing the love of Christ and the church through commitment to an embodied neighbor. Sexual orientation (gay or straight) provides a condition for turning eros into agape. It allows us to follow the incarnation in putting our bodies on the line for others as Christ did for his bride when he said, "This is my body, given for you." That was the bodily commitment that Christ did not abandon but fulfilled when he refused to climb down from the cross. He remained in solidarity with the one who would have to remain aloft, the thief. In fidelity to the thief, Christ kept faith with his bride.

The cross calls to mind the blood of the atonement—another topic that hardly seems promising in this context. Theologies of Christ's blood look bad for women, since men often invoke them to impose sacrifice on others, and bad for people in same-sex relationships, who are sometimes told that their sex lives impugn the blood of Christ. Despite such abuses, blood makes another natural symbol that we dare not force underground but must reclaim, precisely in the context of marriage. For the words, "This is my body, given for you," tell us what bodies are for. They are for commitment in gift.

When Jesus says, "This is my body, given for you," it is among other things a marital remark: he commits himself to be where his body is, to put his body on the line for

his bride. It is this commitment that Christian spouses undertake to imitate when they make promises for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and adversity, till death do them part. Both same- and opposite-sex couples aspire to such commitment, to which the church needs all the witnesses she can find.

A Proper Preface to the Eucharist connects marriage and the Eucharist this way: "In the love of wife and husband you have given us an image of the heavenly Jerusalem, adorned as a bride for her bridegroom, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who loves her and gave himself for her, that he might make the whole creation new." Karl Barth put it more briefly: "Because God loves Israel, there is such a thing as love and marriage."

This then is the answer to the question of the "natural symbols" of male and female: they stretch out to accommodate Christ and the church—in all the genders they include—because the Eucharist is their wedding feast.

And so, because "in Christ there is no longer 'male and female,'" gendered language in the marriage rite should be understood to include same-sex couples.