

Men and Women in Marriage:
Does it Add Up?

The Church of England's official stance on same-sex marriage has met with widespread incredulity. That alone, of course, does not mean that it's wrong; but it does mean that the Church has a lot of explaining and persuading to do. Enter the Faith and Order Commission's document, *Men and Women in Marriage*, which was published in April of this year. Bearing the signatures of both archbishops, it is about as authoritative a statement of the Church's corporate view as can be had. This, in a nutshell, is that marriage is "a faithful, committed, permanent and legally sanctioned relationship *between a man and a woman*" (2). In the present situation, of course, the significant phrase is the last one.

How does the document defend its claim that marriage should be confined to heterosexual couples? It offers three lines of reasoning: that the procreation of children, or at least 'openness' to it, is essential to marriage; that the sexual complementarity of parents is necessary for the fostering of right relations between men and women; and that this is what both Scripture and natural law tell us.

1. Is procreation essential?

According to *Men and Women in Marriage*, "[w]hen we marry ... [w]e open ourselves to parenthood" (21). This remains true "even of a couple who ... have no prospect of actually having children. ... We are (potentially or actually) parents as we are wife and husband" (22, 23). Moreover, it

does not mean ... that only an ideal family unit of two biological parents can provide a home for children. Society has good reason to be grateful to adoptive parents and step-parents, as also to single parents who must sometimes undertake heroic struggles. But the struggles underline the point: they would be less, other things being equal, and the child more securely placed, had it grown up within the marriage-bond of its mother and father. When a single mother says to her children, 'I have to be both mother and father to you!' she recognizes the need to supply the place of the absent father, and teaches her children, at the same time, to look for something more in their home than she can give as a single mother (23-24).

Such reasoning raises a number of questions, to which no answers are given: One is this: How can a couple who "*have no prospect of actually having children*" be considered potential parents? If they have no prospect, surely they have no potential. Might it be that they "have potential" in the sense that they *would* have children, even though they cannot? But desire and potential are not the same things: one can desire something in spite of the lack of potential for having it, and one can have the potential for something without desiring to realise it. Similarly, openness in principle does not amount to potential, if there is no possibility in practice. If potential for procreation is essential to marriage, then heterosexuals without any prospect of having children cannot be married. And yet the Church *does* marry them. It follows that either the Church should cease this inconsistency or open marriage to homosexual couples who desire to have children.

In fact, heterosexual couples lacking any prospect of having children by the usual biological means might still have them by adoption or artificial reproduction. They might fail, of course, either because they do not succeed in obtaining a child to adopt or because they cannot afford to pay for artificial means. But that puts them in exactly the same boat as homosexuals.

A second question is raised by the document's concession that two biological parents are not necessary for a decent home for children. It rightly observes that while adoptive, step-, or single parenthood involves special difficulties, it might nevertheless overcome them. However, it fails to distinguish different kinds of difficulty. Adoptive and step-parents sometimes (but not always) face the difficulty of helping a child adjust to a new environment and a new set of relationships; and single parents face the difficulty of greater constraints of time and money. All other things being equal, it would be better, if this were not so. But other things are often not equal. Sometimes the home provided by the biological parents or by a two-parent household is *worse overall* than that provided by adoptive, step-, and single parents. So far, none of this tells against parenthood by a homosexual couple. Such a couple would provide their combined resources of time and money; and one of them could be the biological parent of their children. As adoptive parents, they would face no greater difficulties than their heterosexual counterparts.

2. How essential is *sexual complementarity*?

Here we arrive at the second line of reasoning offered by *Men and Woman in Marriage* against same-sex marriage: the need for sexually complementary parents. This is perhaps hinted at in the passage quoted above, where we are told that “[w]hen a single mother says to her children, ‘I have to be both mother and father to you!’ she recognizes the need to supply the place of the absent father, and teaches her children, at the same time, to look for something more in their home than she can give as a single mother” (24). What this leaves ambiguous, of course, is whether the mother recognises the need of a *second* parent to help carry the burden, or whether she recognises the need of a *male* parent. The first is uncontroversial; the second is certainly not.

What is hinted at here is made more explicit elsewhere, but often in ways that are tellingly ambiguous and inconclusive. In the document's very first section we are told that “sexual differentiation” is a “gift of God”, and that “[i]t is on male and female that God gives his blessing, which is to be seen, not only in procreation but in human culture, too” (3). Of course, but does God not *also* give his blessing to homosexual parents, and if not, why not? The answer: “Human relations depend on the encounter of men and women, equally and differently human, offering each other social fulfilment and placing their endowments of emotion and perception at each other's service.... To flourish as individuals we need a society in which men and women relate well to each other” (12). This is true, but must such an encounter *always* take place in the parenthood of children? Apparently so: “These various goods [of marriage: offspring or procreation, faithfulness or mutual reciprocity, and sacramental union or permanence] rely in different ways on the complementary gifts of men and women” (35). In sum, the argument seems to be this: that male and female humans have different endowments of emotion and perception; that social and individual flourishing require that male and female humans learn to relate well to each other through their specific differences; and that the process of learning good heterosexual relations, and of communicating them to the next generation, requires heterosexual parenthood.

What ought we to make of this? My first response is to wonder about the claim of sexually specific qualities. In my own experience of (childless) marriage, I observe that the female is more inclined than the male to put people before plans, to lead in the domestic sphere, to cook, to manage bank accounts and rental properties, to maintain family relations, to smile, to sing, to tolerate physical pain, to read

detective fiction, and to have the radio playing always and everywhere. On the other hand, the male is more ruthless in pursuit of professional goals, eats far more than he cooks, tends to neglect family, is more inclined to grumpiness, manages the mortgages and pensions, prefers reading history to fiction, sweeps the kitchen floor more readily, and likes to turn the volume on the radio down. These are certainly differences and making them congruent is certainly a vital requirement of marital harmony, but I'd hesitate to ascribe any of them to the biological fact that my wife is female and I male, rather than the cultural, historical, and professional facts that she is American and I British, that she was brought up by one set of parents and I by another, and that she is a palliative care nurse and I am a fastidious academic.

Second, while I can see that heterosexual parenthood is an obvious, common, and important matrix of good relations between the sexes, I cannot yet see why it is supposed to be *essential*. In certain respects homosexuals and heterosexuals relate better to each other precisely because their relations aren't complicated and clouded by sexual desire. And presumably the children of homosexual parents will learn how to treat members of the opposite sex not only from their parents, but also from relatives, teachers, school-mates, and friends.

It is certainly possible that homosexual parenthood does damage the relational development of children *because of its homosexuality*; but I am not aware of any empirical evidence to that effect. If there is, then the Church needs to deploy it. However, the fact that *Men and Women in Marriage* makes no reference—indeed, no allusion—to it, raises doubts that such evidence exists.

In response, it could be argued that it is too early to judge, since homosexual parenthood is a very recent phenomenon. Indeed, it is an unprecedented social experiment, in the face of which a certain prudent conservatism might be reasonable. Sometimes what looks like a step forward is in fact a step backward. Still, if a conservative stance is to be sustained, it needs to be able to call upon at least *prima facie* corroboration in social experience. Can it? On this *Men and Women in Marriage* is silent.

3. Do the Bible and natural law prohibit same-sex marriage?

This brings us to the third line of reasoning offered by *Men and Women in Marriage*: that the Bible—a *fortiori* Jesus—and natural law confine marriage to heterosexuals. “The teaching of Jesus on marriage began”, we are told, “with creation: ‘he who created them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’” (Matthew 19.4-5)” (5). This is taken to mean that marriage is a social structure rooted in human nature and designed for our benefit (6, 7). In other words, it is a manifestation of natural law (9), here identified with sexual differentiation and reproductive biology (10, 11).

The first comment to make on this is that the context of Jesus' remark is a discussion, not about the importance of procreation and the normativity of heterosexual marriage, but about the conditions of divorce. Jesus argues strongly in favour of fidelity, limiting divorce to cases of sexual immorality. In the light of the assertion, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife”, the clause, “and the two shall become one flesh”, is most naturally taken to refer to a relationship of intimate fidelity. If it does contain an allusion to procreation, it presents it as a symptom of the union of male and female.

What may we infer from this? That heterosexual marriage is centrally about fidelity, and that this usually finds expression in procreation. May we infer that all

marriages *must* express themselves in procreation? No, because the textual contexts of both the Gospel passage and the Genesis passage (2.19-24), which it invokes, make clear that Jesus' intent is to affirm fidelity, of which procreation is an obvious and usual symptom. He does not assert that procreation is a *necessary* symptom. May we infer that marriage must be heterosexual? No, because the passage merely assumes that marriage is heterosexual; it does not assert that it always must be.

So much for Jesus' saying itself. What about Faith and Order's interpretation of it in terms of a natural moral law rooted in sexual differentiation and reproductive biology? The route from biological fact to the moral normativity of heterosexual marriage is left very obscure. The best account of it that I can give is this: heterosexual marriage is a natural institution because it serves the good of the continuation of the human race by enabling procreation, and it serves the good of social peace by training male and female individuals to unite their different emotional and perceptual endowments. Certainly, it does the first, and it might do the second. However, while still the most common means of procreation (and likely to remain so), heterosexual relations are no longer the only ones. Moreover, training in happy sexual relations between the sexes does not appear to be the monopoly of heterosexual parents.

An alternative and (to my mind) more plausible natural law account of marriage is the following. Human beings have goods or forms of flourishing that are proper to their specific nature. These include supportive primary relationships that endure beyond the death of parents, and the perpetuation of human society through the procreation of children. Marriage is a social institution that is optimal for such flourishing, and in that sense it is 'natural'. Most marriages serve both goods; some—for a variety of reasons—do not serve the second. Nevertheless, both remain marriages.

This alternative version of natural law does not exclude the possibility of homosexual marriage. Homosexual couples can bring up children through adoption and, thanks to technology, they can also reproduce. And even when they do not, their marriages can continue to serve the good of enduring, supportive, primary friendship—just as childless heterosexual marriages do.

This account is, I think, cogent, provided that homosexual parenthood *as such* does not damage the development of children; and provided that we have no substantial reason to fear that the cultural normalisation of homosexuality will make it so popular as to jeopardise the reproduction of children and the future of human society. I am not aware of solid empirical evidence of either, and nor, judging by its silence, is *Men and Women in Marriage*. If such evidence does exist, then the Church should present it. If it doesn't exist, then prudence would permit the Church to relax her conservative posture and risk a change of mind.

4. Conclusion

There are four goods or forms of human flourishing that the Church should care to defend and promote in marriage: the reproduction of the human race; the beneficent upbringing of children; enduring personal relationships, sustained by faithfulness and forgiveness; and healthy relations between the sexes. If there are reasons—whether *prima facie* or mature—to suppose that the normalisation of homosexual relations through the legal establishment of same-sex marriage would threaten any of these, then the Church should oppose it. In the past—both biblical and post-biblical—there were reasons: the fragility of human society in the face of natural disaster, disease, and war; the consequent stringency of the social obligation to procreate; and the fear

that the permission of homosexual relations would lead to widespread evasion of that obligation. Now, however, the future of society (in the West) is not (currently) so fragile and normalisation over four decades seems not to have led to a widespread abandonment of heterosexual relations for homosexual ones. Unless the Church can mount a cogent case, invoking strong empirical evidence, that same-sex marriage would cause damage to any of the goods listed above, then its opposition lacks ground and should be put aside. Divine commands and moral rules are not their own justification. Their only rationale is their service of the flourishing of creation, including that of human creatures. After all, the Sabbath was made for made for Man, not Man for the Sabbath.

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