

# The Nuptial Vision of the Bible and its Opponents\*

Jeffrey Peterson  
Lipscomb University—Austin Center

IN MEMORIAM DAVID R. WORLEY, JR. (1949–2017)

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”<sup>1</sup> That first line by the novelist L. P. Hartley applies to the past world disclosed in Christian Scripture as well as any other ancient text. This article considers, briefly, a fundamental aspect of the Bible’s conception of human nature, flourishing, and destiny, which has itself become foreign to an increasing number of people in our time. I refer to this as “The Nuptial Vision of the Christian Bible.”

My basic observation is that in the Scriptures of the Old and New Covenants, as also in the Christian tradition that they inform, the lifelong marital

---

\* An annotated and slightly expanded text of a talk delivered to the *Restoration Quarterly* Breakfast at the Society of Biblical Literature’s Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, November 21, 2016; I have not attempted to efface all indications of the original occasion or the oral setting. I am grateful to James W. Thompson, editor of *Restoration Quarterly*, for the invitation to address that gathering and the occasion this provided to collect my thoughts on this contentious topic. I am grateful also for comment on earlier drafts (both appreciative and critical) offered by C. Leonard Allen, Mike Blevins, Frazier Conley, Mitchell East, Everett Ferguson, Carl R. Holladay, Earl Lavender, Thomas H. Olbricht, Peter Patton, Ben Peterson, J. J. M. Roberts, Katy Smith, DeAnn Stuart, Jerry L. Sumney, Gary Thornton, Mary Elisabeth Weed, Christopher R. Wiley, and my colleagues at Austin Graduate School of Theology: Mark Shipp, Todd Hall, Keith Stanglin, Stephen Lawson, Stan Reid, and especially the chancellor and biblical scholar to whose memory this essay is dedicated. All web pages cited were most recently accessed on March 26, 2022. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations follow the NRSV.

<sup>1</sup> L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: New York Review Books, 2002 [1953]), 17.

union of man and woman ordered toward the procreation and nurture of offspring is both a pervasive norm for the ordering of personal life and a recurring symbol of divine creation and new creation. Nor are these two aspects of the Christian Bible's "nuptial vision" unrelated. By living in accordance with the norm, the people of God exhibit the divine image in their daily existence, becoming participants with God in the creation and care of new life; their natural lives bear witness to the biblical vision of the God who creates all things, filling the earth with life, and who in Christ bestows eternal life on those he has created in his image, creating new heavens and a new earth and making all things new.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the biblical texts that develop this vision are familiar, but they raise numerous and thorny issues of interpretation, and a comprehensive treatment of the subject is far beyond what space or the limits of my expertise will permit. In these remarks on a few texts and their interpretation in our context, I will hope to be found guilty only of sins of omission, which will be many.<sup>3</sup> This

---

<sup>2</sup> The latter point was given more poetic expression by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) in his characterization of the biblical history as "a love story between God and humanity" in the essay, "The Local Church and the Universal Church": "The basic idea of sacred history is that of gathering together, of uniting human beings in the one body of Christ, the union of human beings and through human beings of all creation with God. There is only one bride, only one body of Christ, not many brides, not many bodies." *America* 185/16 (November 19, 2001): 10, at <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/351/local-church-and-universal-church>.

<sup>3</sup> The most obvious omissions concern issues treated extensively in Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996); Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008 [1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1998]); Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005 [1998–2000]); William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Christopher Chenault Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2007); Dale S. Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Joseph C. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014); Thomas Hopko, *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction: Eastern Orthodox Reflections* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Chesterton: Ancient Faith, 2015); Philip Turner, *Christian Ethics and the Church: Ecclesial Foundations for Moral Thought and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), especially 167–68, 186–88, 211–14; Michelle Lee-Barnwell, *Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom*

essay focuses on how communities and individuals committed to ordering our lives in meaningful continuity with the Christian tradition should understand, teach, and practice the sexual ethics encoded in the biblical witness; such related and significant questions as what sort of legislation governing sexual mores should be supported by Christians granted the democratic franchise falls outside its scope.

The foundational text is, of course, the prologue to the biblical narrative in Genesis 1–3. God’s creative works in the Bible’s opening chapter culminate in the creation of humankind, male and female, in God’s image and likeness, given the divine charge to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:27–28).<sup>4</sup> As Ronald Hendel comments, “Procreation (as the human mode of creation) is part of what makes humans correspond to the image of God.”<sup>5</sup> Humankind, brought forth through the union of the man and the woman, is entrusted responsibility over the earth as God’s representatives. It is only when humankind has arrived on the scene that the evaluation of the Creator’s work is upgraded, from “good” to “very good” (Gen 1:31).

In Genesis 2, the focus narrows to the relationship between the man and the woman, described as an organic union in which they “become one flesh,” so that a man leaves one household to “cleave unto his wife” (Gen 2:24 KJV)

---

*Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); Daniel Mattson, *Why I Don’t Call Myself Gay: How I Reclaimed My Sexual Reality and Found Peace* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2017); Janet E. Smith, ed., *Why Humanae Vitae Is Still Right* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2018); Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); Anthony Esolen, *Sex and the Unreal City: The Demolition of the Western Mind* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2020); Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Edward Feser, “The Metaphysical Foundations of Sexual Morality,” in David Boonin, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexual Ethics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 19–35; and Aimee Byrd, *The Sexual Reformation: Restoring the Dignity and Personhood of Man and Woman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022). Celibacy and contraception are topics much neglected in Protestant exegesis and instruction; the collected exhortations of John Paul II on the “theology of the body” (cited below, n. 6) are instructive on those and other matters.

<sup>4</sup> As Pieter W. van der Horst and Silvia Castelli observe, “According to the Bible, these are the very first words that God spoke to mankind” (“Celibacy in Early Judaism,” *Revue Biblique* 109 [2002]: 391).

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed., ed. Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, et al. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 7.

and form another. To quote the most theologically insightful interpretation of these chapters of which I am aware:

The account of the creation of man in Genesis 1 affirms from the beginning and directly that man was created in the image of God inasmuch as he is male and female. The account in Genesis 2, by contrast, does not speak of the “image of God,” but reveals, in the manner proper to it, that the complete and definitive creation of “man” (subject first to the experience of original solitude) expresses itself in giving life to the “*communio personarum*” that man and woman form.... *Man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons, which man and woman form from the very beginning....* Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. He is, in fact, “from the beginning” not only an image in which the solitude of one Person, who rules the world, mirrors itself, but also and essentially the image of an inscrutable divine communion of Persons.... In the mystery of creation—on the basis of the original and constitutive “solitude” of his being—man has been endowed with a deep unity between what is, humanly and through the body, male in him and what is, equally humanly and through the body, female in him. On all this, right from the beginning, the blessing of fruitfulness descended, linked with human procreation (cf. Gen 1:28).<sup>6</sup>

In current scholarly jargon, the prologue to the story that the Bible tells “privileges” the organic union of man and woman in prospect of new life. From Genesis 3 onward, we observe this relationship take shape amid the crooked timber of humanity as we encounter it in experience.

Beginning in chapter 12, Genesis tells the story of one family chosen as the instrument of God’s blessing for all the families of the earth. Nils Dahl has characterized this as the narrative of “God’s endangered promises” to

---

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 163–64 (TOB 9.3, in the system of reference to this work explained on pp. 731–35 of this edition; italics original). Michael Waldstein’s introduction (pp. 1–128) is a helpful guide to the argument. See also Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II’s Man and Woman He Created Them*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2008), and *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution*, rev. ed. (West Chester: Ascension, 2009).

Abraham and his descendants, which find fulfillment in constantly surprising ways.<sup>7</sup> The fortunes of this extended family and its constituent households supply the suspense of the narrative, the drama of which repeatedly turns on the questions whether and how this family line will continue.<sup>8</sup> Not all of the unions that figure in this history are monogamous and fruitful, on the pattern of the Genesis prologue; the tale includes polygyny, concubinage, and rape, as well as barrenness, consistently presented as a tragic circumstance. But as David Mace notes, in the course of Israel's history, reflected in the unfolding biblical narrative, "the monogamic ideal which had always existed was able to gain almost universal acceptance."<sup>9</sup>

In the Latter Prophets, the nuptial union between husband and wife becomes a metaphor, a symbol of the covenantal relationship between God and his chosen people Israel. The book of Hosea presents the pattern elaborated on in Isaiah (1:8, 21; 4:2–5:7; 54:4–8, et al.), Jeremiah (chapters 2–3) and Ezekiel (chapters 16 and 23): Israel has been betrothed to God, who takes her as his bride; she proves unfaithful and suffers rejection and punishment; yet through God's magnanimity she is promised reconciliation and a blessed future.<sup>10</sup> Hosea's vision of future reconciliation employs the imagery of Genesis 1 in its anticipation of "a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground" (Hos 2:18).<sup>11</sup> The biblical canon includes a poetic celebration of nuptial love in the Song of Songs, but it

---

<sup>7</sup> Nils A. Dahl, *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 73–76.

<sup>8</sup> On the shape of the Genesis narrative in particular, see Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, JSOTSup 96 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> David R. Mace, *Hebrew Marriage: A Sociological Study* (London: Epworth, 1953), xiv. Polygyny was a practical option only for kings and other elites; see William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 49–51. The reform of Ezra 9–10, while it dissolved existing marriages, paradoxically underscores the importance of the marital relationship to the character of the people of God, a nation composed of households.

<sup>10</sup> See André Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism in Second Temple Writings, the New Testament, and Rabbinic Literature: Divine Marriage at Key Moments of Salvation History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 4–23.

<sup>11</sup> Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 6.

is perhaps only its allegorical interpretation in light of this prophetic metaphor that secured its place there.<sup>12</sup>

The Scriptures of the New Covenant introduce the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world as a son of David and of Abraham (Matt 1:1), placed by divine action in the household of Mary and Joseph (Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–56; 2:1–40). From Paul we learn that the salvation of gentiles is accomplished through their adoption into Abraham’s family (Gal 3:26–4:7; cf. Rom 4:9–18; 8:14–17). Concretely, this took place through the affiliation of gentile households with Israel’s Messiah, as we see in the letters of Paul and the book of Acts.

Jewish Scripture and tradition supply the foundation of the New Testament’s sexual ethics.<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ teaching on the permanence of the marital bond, as presented in Matthew and Mark, draws explicit inspiration from Gen 1:27 and 2:24 and establishes lifelong, exclusive unions of male and female as the norm for the majority of his disciples who do not follow Jesus’ personal example and practice celibacy, as Paul also did (cf. especially 1 Cor 7:2).<sup>14</sup> William Loader and Robert Gagnon, a fine liberal and a fine conservative NT scholar, have both devoted extensive attention to sexuality in the Bible, and they agree, as do E. P. Sanders and John Meier, two of the most accomplished scholars of the Jesus tradition, that on matters of sexual morality, the NT supplies no

---

<sup>12</sup> See Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 293–94 and n. 10; and, on the history of interpretation, 279–80, 292–95, as well as Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 5–8.

<sup>13</sup> See Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136–57; Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 26–28; Peter Tomson, “If This Be from Heaven...”: *Jesus and the New Testament Authors in Their Relationship to Judaism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), especially 194–200; James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> A similar concern appears in Jesus’ milieu in the warning of the *Damascus Document* against the “first trap of Belial” set for Israel, viz., “fornication, by taking two wives in their lifetimes, although the principle of creation is ‘male and female He created them’” (CD 4:15–21, following Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* [New York: HarperOne, 2005], 55–56), opposing polygyny or the remarriage of widowers or both.

evidence for a “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.”<sup>15</sup> If we seek such a savior, we must imagine him; he cannot be discovered.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus’ teaching, “What God has joined together, let no one put asunder,” presents marriage as a union between creatures accomplished by the Creator himself—a sacramental union.<sup>17</sup> The use of the term *mysterion* in Eph 5:32 points in the same direction; it is of course the lexical basis for the Catholic designation of marriage as a sacrament (Vulgate *sacramentum*).<sup>18</sup> There is more evidence than Protestant commentators have typically recognized in favor of the interpretation that, in Markus Barth’s summary, “marriage is a means of grace by which man and woman participate in the mystery of creation, incarnation, redemption, reconciliation, perfection.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See Loader, *Sexuality in the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), especially 112–20; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 185–228; E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1989), 324–28 (for Sanders’ primary authorship of this chapter, see p. viii); and John P. Meier, *Law and Love, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 95–128.

<sup>16</sup> On the exceptive clauses in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 and their history of interpretation, in addition to Keener (above, n. 3), see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary on Matthew 1–7*, rev. ed., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 251–259; *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary on Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 492–496. “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11 KJV) is likely not an authentic logion or original to John’s Gospel (or to Luke’s following 21:38, where it appears in some manuscripts), but it is the most lenient word on sexual morality in the tradition and expresses Jesus’ characteristic combination of a welcoming embrace of sinners with the appeal to abandon their sin. See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 589–92; Raymond F. Collins, *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 9–10; Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 135–38.

<sup>17</sup> The quotation is from Mark 10:9//Matt 19:6 (NRSV, altered).

<sup>18</sup> In the clause “This mystery is great” (Eph 5:32 NASB), the most likely antecedent of “this” (*touto*) is the immediately preceding statement freely quoted from Gen 2:24, “[the two] shall become one flesh” (NASB). In that case, the “one-flesh” union concretized in the coupling of husband and wife ordered toward procreation supplies the basis for the analogy with Christ and the Church.

<sup>19</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 4–6*, Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 34A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 [1974]), 747. Barth does not himself embrace the interpretation he so ably summarizes.

Commentators sometimes offer the curious suggestion that procreation is not in view in biblical texts dealing with marriage which do not explicitly mention children.<sup>20</sup> This underestimates the degree to which procreation is presupposed; any time before the second half of the twentieth century and the widespread availability of reliable artificial contraception, to counsel husbands and wives to live together as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 7, for example, was, inevitably, to invite pregnancies. Children do appear in Paul's marital instructions (1 Cor 7:14) and in the household codes of Ephesians and Colossians, immediately following the instructions to husbands and wives (Eph 5:21–6:4; Col 3:18–21); and it is likely no accident that in the Gospels, immediately after teaching on marriage, Jesus welcomes the children (Mark 10:1–16; Matt 19:1–15). Pauline and early Christian eschatology were not so imminent as to preclude the formation of Christian families.<sup>21</sup>

The prophets' nuptial metaphor is extended in the New Testament and applied to the relationship between the Messiah and his people in 2 Corinthians 11, Ephesians 5, and climactically in the closing chapters of Revelation (19:6–9; 21:2, 9; 22:17).<sup>22</sup> Celebration of the prospect of new life was integral to wedding festivities in antiquity, so it is appropriate that at the close of the canon, the bride of the Lamb cries out for the advent of her groom and the birth of a new creation (Rev 22:17).

The nuptial vision of the Bible, briefly sketched here, has fashionable and influential opponents. Among its most controversial aspects is the prohibition of sexual intimacy outside lifelong marital unions ordered toward procreation, especially the strictures against same-sex relations in Leviticus, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy.<sup>23</sup> While much more could be said, it is worth observing at least that the Holiness Code of Leviticus (chapters 17–26) is a legal text; typical of such texts, it compels and forbids particular behaviors, prescribing penalties for failure to comply. It is, further, an ancient Near Eastern legal

---

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 47.

<sup>21</sup> On the force and implications for Christian marital ethics of "the language of 'eschatological imminence,'" with particular reference to 1 Cor 7:29–30, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 580–83.

<sup>22</sup> See Villeneuve, *Nuptial Symbolism*, 203–67.

<sup>23</sup> See Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:9–11.



text, and its penalties are often draconian by contemporary Western standards, as indeed by the standards of rabbinic Judaism and ancient Christianity.

It may also be noted that Leviticus 20 prescribes penalties for those who enter into a variety of sexual unions other than those ordered toward procreation and excluding near kin—all but one of those heterosexual.<sup>24</sup> That is to say, Leviticus directs no particular animus toward homosexual persons, if we define that adjective as the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* does, namely, “[s]exually attracted to people of one’s own sex,” with no inherent reference to sexual activity.<sup>25</sup> It is a source of considerable confusion in our public discussion that the meaning of such terms as “homosexual” and “gay” suffers constant equivocation on this point.<sup>26</sup> Voltaire probably didn’t say, “If you would converse with me, first define your terms,” but it’s still good advice.

About the laws of Leviticus 18 and 20, Mary Douglas remarked in her book *Purity and Danger*:

[H]oliness is exemplified by completeness [and] requires ... keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order. Under this head all the rules of sexual morality [in Leviticus] exemplify the holy... in the simple sense of right order ... of separating that which should be separated.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Baruch Schwartz remarks that the text “views all sexual acts that are not potentially procreative as aberrant,” Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 252. So also Jacob Milgrom: “In a word, the theme (with Ramban) is procreation,” *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 207.

<sup>25</sup> Lesley Brown, ed., *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 1.1254, s.v., “homosexual.”

<sup>26</sup> This equivocation is illustrated in the larger *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 7.345, s.v., “homosexual”, in which the first definition of the word (as an adjective) refers both to “a sexual propensity for one’s own sex” and to “sexual activity with a member of one’s own sex,” while the second (as a noun) refers only to “a sexual propensity” and “sexual desires,” with no mention of sexual activity.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1984 [1966]), 54.

Baruch Levine observes further that “by their negations, the Torah laws provide a definition of the nuclear family.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the laws define the order of that image of the created universe brought into being through the union of husband and wife. According to Jacob Milgrom, the motifs of separation and imitation of God that recur throughout these chapters (e.g., “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy,” Lev 20:26) echo the creation narrative of Genesis 1.<sup>29</sup> God separates light from darkness, day from night, dry land from sea, and so establishes the natural order, in which he creates first vegetable and animal and then human life; in Leviticus 18, God separates with respect to sexual contact parent from child, brother from sister, aunt and uncle from niece and nephew, and so establishes the familial order, in which humans cooperate with God in the creation of new life and Israelites bring new worshippers of God into being. In light of Milgrom’s exegesis, it seems reasonable to hear in the prohibition of a man “l[y]ing with a male as with a woman” (Lev 18:22) an echo of the Genesis narrative of God’s creation of “humankind in his image, . . . male and female” (Gen 1:27), charged to “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28).

Paul, the apostle to the gentiles who devoted himself to proclaiming a salvation “not by works of law,” nonetheless enjoined on his converts the Torah’s prohibition of “sexual immorality” (*porneia*; cf. 1 Cor 5:1; Gal 5:19; 1 Thess 4:3–8). This prohibition included same-sex relations, concerning which Paul replaced temporal penalties with spiritual ones (1 Cor 6:9) and explicitly extended the censure to include female relationships as well as male (Rom 1:26–27).<sup>30</sup> A generation of exegetical attempts to obscure the plain sense of these

---

<sup>28</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 254. Ephraim Radner offers a Christological variation on this interpretation: “The sexual couplings prohibited in Lev 18 sketch the shape . . . of a proper ‘union into one flesh’ from which the purposed descendants of Adam and Abraham will lead toward the coming of the Christ,” *Leviticus*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 189.

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 3A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 [2000]), 1761.

<sup>30</sup> For similar concerns in the Jewish milieu of early Christianity as informing Paul, see Loader, *Making Sense of Sex*, 132–39. The parallel between “none of these will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:10) and “as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21, emphasis mine) suggests that instruction on prohibited sexual relationships was an element of Paul’s catechetical instruction to his converts, with same-sex relations included under the category of *porneia*,

texts has, in my judgment, left their sense plainer than ever.<sup>31</sup> Martin Marty's clever marginalization of "the five or six references in the bible that are negative toward homosexuality"<sup>32</sup> neglects both the Bible's nuptial vision as a whole and the gravity with which acts of sexual intimacy are invested throughout the canon, typified by Paul's comment, "the Lord is an avenger in all these things" (1 Thess 4:6).

Illustrations abound in 1 Corinthians. Thus, in a rare exercise of the apostolic authority he typically hesitates to assert so baldly (1 Cor 5:1–5), Paul unilaterally excludes a member from the Christian assembly for violating the levitical rule against relations with "his father's wife" (cf. Lev 18:8; 20:11); he treats this as a case of *porneia* (1 Cor 5:1), suggesting that his definition of the term includes the acts prohibited in Leviticus 18 and 20. The apostle offers a striking interpretation of the statement of Genesis that "the two shall be one flesh" (1 Cor 6:16), applying it not only to the enduring union between husband and wife, but even to the fleeting liaison between man and prostitute; in

---

which Christians were to shun. That *porneia* figured in Paul's catechetical instruction is also indicated by 1 Thess 4:3–8, presented as a reminder of "instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 4:2), through which in the founding of their community the Thessalonians "learned from us how you ought to live and to please God" (1 Thess 4:1). On the latter passage, see George P. Carras, "Jewish Ethics and Gentile Converts: Remarks on 1 Thes 4,3–8," in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins (Leuven: University Press, 1990), 306–15.

<sup>31</sup> Noteworthy among these attempts are John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 91–118, and Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), especially 37–64. For counterpoint, see Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament*, 20–33, and the other relevant material in his oeuvre on sexuality in the New Testament's milieu, fully accessible via its "Index of Subjects" (*Making Sense of Sex*, 161–68); Gagnon's book (cited above, n. 15) and other work collected at [www.robgagnon.net](http://www.robgagnon.net); Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 347–406; and Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), especially 3–118. For a full and informative discussion of pertinent ancient evidence, see also E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 335–73.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Martin Marty, "Evangelical Ministry to Gays and Lesbians Admits It Caused Harm," at <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/evangelical-ministry-gays-and-lesbians-admits-it-caused-harm-martin-e-marty-0>. As suggested above, Marty's comment accurately represents the biblical witness only if his word *homosexuality* refers in contemporary terms to sexual activity rather than only to orientation.

the case of a Christian man, Paul implicates Christ in that union.<sup>33</sup> Further, Paul treats sexual intimacy as a debt that husband owes to wife and wife owes to husband (1 Cor 7:2–5); for Christian spouses, sexual union is to be an act not of taking but of giving, appropriate to a relationship in which one surrenders one’s body in devotion to the other for whom one is naturally fitted and to whom one is spiritually bound. Finally, Paul recalls wanton “sexual immorality” as contributing to the downfall of the “ancestors” liberated from Egypt (1 Cor 10:8). It is reasonable to conclude that Paul found the stringent sexual ethic of the Torah liberating, and to wonder whether many of his Greco-Roman converts did not as well—though presumably not the fellow in 1 Corinthians 5.<sup>34</sup>

In any case, the biblical sexual ethic contrasts sharply with contemporary Western mores in that it admits no casual or merely recreational sexual intimacy and sanctions no sexual congress outside monogamous unions ordered toward procreation.<sup>35</sup> This is neglected in the least convincing argument I have seen from the pen of Luke Timothy Johnson, arguing that on this question experience trumps Scripture, tradition, and (I would argue) reason; that hermeneutic isn’t justified by the story that Acts 15 tells, in which the witness of

---

<sup>33</sup> See Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 143–81.

<sup>34</sup> See Ruden, *Paul Among the People*, 198–99; the entire book offers valuable historical context for the logic and reception of Pauline and early Christian sexual ethics. See also Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); “The First Sexual Revolution: How Christianity Transformed the Ancient World,” *First Things* 279 (January 2018): 41–46, at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/the-first-sexual-revolution>.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Esolen expresses the conflicting visions powerfully and succinctly: “The sexual revolution always has been a war waged against the ordinary family, against the ordinary ways of men and women and children. The moral law as regards sex is meant to protect that family from threats without and within: from the pseudo-marriage that is fornication, from the betrayal of marriage that is adultery, from the rickets and scurvy of impure habits, and from the mockery of the marital act that is sodomy” (“Pronouns, Ordinary People, and the War over Reality,” *Public Discourse*, October 13, 2016, at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2016/10/17811/>). The conceptual issues involved in evaluating traditionalist vs. modernist sexual ethics, relevant to understanding Jesus’ teaching and the Genesis creation narratives, are now usefully clarified in Edward Feser, “The Metaphysical Foundations of Sexual Morality” (above, n. 3).

Scripture is crucial to the decision the apostolic conference reaches.<sup>36</sup> Christians like Marty and Johnson who would dispense with the Bible's prohibitions

---

<sup>36</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, "Homosexuality and the Church: Scripture and Experience," *Commonweal* 134/12, June 11, 2007, at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-0> and *Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 96–97; on the appeal to Scripture in Acts 15, see Richard Bauckham, "James and the Gentiles (Acts 15.13–21)," in Ben Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154–84. In evaluating the limitations of experience as a criterion for deciding questions of sexual ethics, it is instructive to compare two recent memoirs of young male authors with superficially similar personal experiences that nonetheless advise divergent paths for Christians and churches negotiating the current cultural landscape. Justin Lee recounts how attaining his maturity he came to see himself as "a sheltered Southern Baptist boy who wanted to serve God and couldn't help being attracted to other guys" (*Tom: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-Vs.-Christians Debate* [New York: Jericho Books, 2012], 164). Reflecting on his personal experience, he urges Christians to embrace the categories of identity offered by contemporary sexual ideology and accept that "God wants to use gay Christians—along with bi Christians, and trans Christians, and others in similar situations—to help the church become what she's supposed to be" (*Tom*, 244). He urges evangelical churches divided over same-sex relationships to treat the question as a matter of indifference, on the model of Romans 14 rather than 1 Corinthians 5, so that Christians can shed the acquired reputation of being ungracious (*Tom*, 244–47). Daniel C. Mattson also recounts his personal history as that of a "sheltered" Catholic boy who attended a nondenominational Christian school. Arriving at adolescence he "hadn't even known what 'gay' meant; I just knew that men were sexually attractive to me" (*Why I Don't Call Myself Gay: How I Reclaimed My Sexual Identity and Found Peace* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017], 32). He also describes his lifelong experience of being torn (to use Lee's term); but unlike Lee, he perceives himself specifically as having been "pulled ... between two competing worldviews." The Christian (and most clearly the Catholic) view holds that "there are moral absolutes in the world, that there is a God, that he loves us, and that human sexuality is a great gift to mankind that brings joy and fulfillment ... when one accepts the reality that our sole sexual identity is male and female, and that to be truly satisfying and filling, sex must be used rationally, according to its inherent design, and be open to the precious gift of new human life"; the opposing view that "produced the sexual revolution ... claims that feelings and whom we're attracted to are more reliable indicators of truth about our sexual identity than the design of the human body ... rejects moral absolutes ... [and] views sex primarily as a means toward pleasure ... [and] pregnancy as an inconvenient side effect of sexuality" (*Why I Don't Call Myself Gay*, 9–10). Through a significantly broader and deeper study of the Catholic tradition than Lee has undertaken of his Protestant heritage (to judge from a comparison of the text, notes, and bibliographies of the two books), Mattson came to understand his same-sex attraction in light of historic Christian moral teaching as a call to suffering, indeed (quoting John Paul II's apostolic letter "On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering") as an invitation from Christ himself: "Take part through your suffering in the work of saving the

as an aspect of its nuptial vision must answer the challenge posed by Richard Neuhaus: how does relaxing the prohibitions that subordinate sexual desire to procreation and the needs of family serve the biblical ends of “marital fidelity, chastity, the conceiving and rearing of children, and the care for the most vulnerable among us”?<sup>37</sup>

Though it has intensified in recent years, opposition to this biblical vision and to the traditional family in which it is embodied is not a recent development; Christopher Lasch, a writer of the left, noted the opposition already in 1977, in his book, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*.<sup>38</sup> Conventional elite wisdom (a combination of romanticism, hedonism, and hyper-individualism) celebrates rebellion against the created order—indeed, against the *idea* of a created order. Stephen Gardner has summarized Philip Rieff’s analysis of twentieth-century Western culture as based on the secular dogma that our “desire is [our] ‘true’ self, the passion that constitutes [our] being.”<sup>39</sup> Applied to

---

world, a salvation achieved through my suffering!” (*Why I Don’t Call Myself Gay*, 76). That two Christian writers with such similar personal experience should arrive at such antithetical conclusions suggests that experience is a criterion of limited value for resolving theological disputes.

<sup>37</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (New York: Doubleday), 174. A consideration of questions related to sexuality fully informed by reason would include dispassionate evaluation of the scientific literature surveyed in the “study of studies” by Lawrence S. Mayer and Paul R. McHugh, “Sexuality and Gender,” *The New Atlantis* 50 (Fall 2016), at [https://www.thenewatlantis.com/docLib/20160819\\_TNA50SexualityandGender.pdf](https://www.thenewatlantis.com/docLib/20160819_TNA50SexualityandGender.pdf); their findings are presented in a more accessible form by the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture in *Sexuality and Gender: A Companion to the New Atlantis Special Report* (2017), at [https://www.amazon.com/Sexuality-Gender-Companion-Atlantis-special/dp/1948128004/ref=sr\\_1\\_5](https://www.amazon.com/Sexuality-Gender-Companion-Atlantis-special/dp/1948128004/ref=sr_1_5).

<sup>38</sup> See Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), especially chapters 7 (“The Attack on the Nuclear Family and the Search for ‘Alternate Life Styles’”) and 8 (“Authority and the Family: Law and Order in a Permissive Society”).

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Gardner, in an essay marking the fortieth anniversary of Rieff’s book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), “The Eros and Ambitions of Psychological Man” at [https://www.academia.edu/5479301/The\\_Eros\\_and\\_Ambitions\\_of\\_Psychological\\_Man](https://www.academia.edu/5479301/The_Eros_and_Ambitions_of_Psychological_Man), 17. Gardner employs Rieff’s term “psychological man” to describe the contemporary Western or “first world” personality; his full sentence reads, “However social it may be, however obstructed or deflected, Psychological Man clings to his desire as to his quintessence; his desire is his ‘true’ self, the passion that constitutes his being.” Rieff’s own exposition of the social significance of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory is much more discursive, and

sexual passion specifically, that seems a reasonable summary of the contemporary zeitgeist.<sup>40</sup>

We're given to understand that the love that confers supreme value on a life is *erōs*, in the form that most fully satisfies each of us. Rather than receiving the life of a man or a woman as a gift from God and seeking how best to devote it to his glory and the service of others, we're invited to construct our individual lives as some amalgam of Milton's Satan and Anna Karenina.<sup>41</sup> The word *hate* is redefined to include "advising persons for or against certain conduct for their

---

his consideration of the "renunciatory controls of sexual opportunity ... placed in the Christian culture very near the center of the symbolic that has not held" (16) only occasionally finds expression in an epigram as concise as "Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased" (*Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 24–25), or "Historically, the rejection of sexual individualism (which divorces pleasure and procreation) was the consensual matrix of Christian culture" (*Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 17). Also notable is Rieff's quotation of Freud's statement of the aim of psychoanalysis as "to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id" (*Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 6 n. 3). Rieff's work is complemented by that of Augusto del Noce, accessible in English in the collection edited and translated by Carlo Lancellotti, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> For this ethic as Humean, as opposed to Thomist, see Edward Skidelsky, "Mad Men and the Just Man: Alasdair MacIntyre's New Work on Ethics," *Commonweal* 144/19 (December 1, 2017): 36–38, at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/mad-men-just-man>. This is evident from Hume's dictum, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739], Book II, Part III, Sect. III, "Of the Influencing Motives of the Will," at [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0075](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H_4_0075)). For a deeply literate and philosophically rich consideration of the place of *erōs* in human life, see David K. O'Connor, *Plato's Bedroom: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Love* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, [2015]).

<sup>41</sup> Iris Murdoch observed that the "Kantian man, or Kantian man-god[,] ... free, independent, lonely, powerful, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy[,] ... had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer" (*The Sovereignty of Good* [New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985 [1970], 80); cf. her reference to the modern "Luciferian philosophy of adventures of the will" (48). On the character and moral significance of the tale of Anna Karenina, see the illuminating reflections of Gary Saul Morson, "The Moral Urgency of *Anna Karenina*," *Commentary* 139/4 (April 1, 2015): 34–42, at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/gary-morson/moral-urgency-anna-karenina/>; and, much more fully, *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), especially 55–139.

spiritual benefit,” a definition that renders much of the New Testament hate speech.<sup>42</sup> We’re told that to fulfill the Christian imperative of love it is not enough to regard those whom political activists gather under the designation “LGBTQ” as persons made in God’s image and to seek their good, as of course disciples of Jesus must; no, it is said, we must also revise our understanding of that good, embracing the social and political agenda associated with the “LGBTQ” rubric and abandoning traditional Christian sexual morality in the process. The attitude of “LGBTQ” activists toward those who would offer a thoughtful word supportive of the biblical vision is illustrated by the response their fellow academics accorded Richard Swinburne of Oxford, Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh of Arizona State and Johns Hopkins, and Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas—adequately summarized as “‘Shut up,’ they explained” (with apologies to Ring Lardner).<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, has commented, “I am not allowed by Jesus to hate anyone. Our culture has accepted two huge lies: The first is that if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle, you must fear them or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don’t have to compromise convictions to be compassionate,” at <https://saddleback.com/archive/blog/pastor-ricks-news-views/2012/03/02/news-views-03-02-12>.

<sup>43</sup> See Gilbert Seldes, ed., *The Portable Ring Lardner* (New York: Viking, 1946 [1920]), 704. On Swinburne, see Jingyi Cui and Natalie Wright, “Philosophy professor under fire for online post,” *Yale Daily News*, October 5, 2016, at <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2016/10/05/philosophy-professor-under-fire-for-online-post/>. On Mayer and McHugh, see Alyssa Wooden, “Prof. criticized for ‘anti-LGBT’ paper,” *Johns Hopkins News-Letter*, April 27, 2017, at <http://www.jhunewsletter.com/article/2017/04/profs-criticized-for-anti-lgbt-paper/>; Chris Beyrer, Robert W. Blum, and Tonia C. Poteat, “Hopkins faculty disavow ‘troubling’ report on gender and sexuality,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 28, 2016, at <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-lgbtq-hopkins-20160928-story.html>; and Paul R. McHugh and Lawrence S. Mayer, “Authors defend controversial report on sexuality,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 11, 2016, at <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-mchugh-response-20161011-story.html>. On Regnerus, see Tara Merrigan, “UT investigates professor’s study on children with gay parents,” *Austin American-Statesman*, September 1, 2012, at <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/local/2012/09/01/ut-investigates-professors-study-on-children-with-gay-parents/9782557007/>, and “University of Texas at Austin Completes Inquiry into Allegations of Scientific Misconduct,” *UT News*, August 29, 2012, at <https://news.utexas.edu/2012/08/29/university-of-texas-at-austin-completes-inquiry-into-allegations-of-scientific-misconduct/>.



The secular vision of sexuality that has eclipsed the biblical vision in American public life has been most influentially articulated by Associate Justice Anthony Kennedy, who wrote in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."<sup>44</sup> Over the past five decades, such a vision has informed the legal redefinition of the institution of civil marriage, on which Christian churches in the course of American history have relied (wisely or unwisely) to form the lives of their members in accordance with the biblical vision.

As John Witte details in his history of marriage, religion, and law in the West, U.S. marital law has seen two great waves of reform in the past century. The first (ca. 1910–1940) aimed at equalizing the legal privileges of husband and wife within the marital relationship; this could claim support from the elements of mutuality in the marital teaching of Jesus and Paul. The second wave of reform (begun ca. 1965 and still continuing), Witte says, "seems calculated to break the preeminence of traditional marriage, and the basic values of the Western tradition that have sustained it," especially marriage as a binding commitment to the family that a marital union brings into being.<sup>45</sup> The Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) is only the most recent development in this 50+-year wave; it should be noted that the demolition job has been the work principally of heterosexual Americans and could not have been accomplished by the vastly smaller homosexual population on its own.

---

<sup>44</sup> See *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, at <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/505/833.html>. For a trenchant critique of Kennedy's dogma and its application, see Anthony Esolen, "On Justice Kennedy's Tenuous Grasp of Human Dignity," *Crisis*, July 2, 2015, at <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2015/on-justice-kennedys-tenuous-grasp-of-human-dignity>.

<sup>45</sup> John Witte, Jr., "The Meanings of Marriage," *First Things* 126 (October 2002): 30–41, at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/10/the-meanings-of-marriage>. This essay draws and expands on Witte's history, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012). For the traditional understanding of marriage that has been deconstructed in recent Western jurisprudence, see Ryan T. Anderson and Sherif Girgis, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012); for the connection between marital doctrine and the free exercise of religion promised by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, see Anderson, *Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2015).

The waning of traditional marriage in American life should concern not only those nostalgic for Ozzie and Harriet, but also all who seek social justice and the welfare of the poor and vulnerable, for the costs of America's decades-long social experiment are borne especially by children in single-parent households, which have multiplied under the new sexual regime.<sup>46</sup> The clearest finding in the social science on poverty is the correlation between fatherless families and diminished prospects for children's flourishing.<sup>47</sup> Presidential candidate Barack Obama summarized this research in these words on Father's Day, 2008:

We know the statistics—that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it.<sup>48</sup>

In the words of Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution, “Social policy faces an uphill battle as long as families continue to fragment and children are deprived of the resources of two parents”<sup>49</sup>—ideally, their birth parents; and it is not only material resources of which the children of divorce and illegitimacy are deprived.

---

<sup>46</sup> See James Q. Wilson, *Two Nations* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1998); Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), especially 69–70; W. Bradley Wilcox, “The Evolution of Divorce,” *National Affairs* 1 (Fall 2009): 81–94 (<https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-evolution-of-divorce>); Mary Eberstadt, “Two Nations, Revisited,” *National Affairs* 40 (Summer 2018) (<https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/two-nations-revisited>).

<sup>47</sup> A major study from the AEI-Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity notes: “[C]hildren raised in single-parent families are nearly five times as likely to be poor as those in married-couple families” (“Changing family structures play a major role in the fight against poverty,” at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/changing-family-structures-play-a-major-role-in-the-fight-against-poverty/>).

<sup>48</sup> “Text of Obama’s fatherhood speech,” *Politico*, June 15, 2008, at <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/06/text-of-obamas-fatherhood-speech-011094>.

<sup>49</sup> “AEI-Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity, “Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream,” 3, at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Chapter-3.pdf>.

In the course of the last several decades, the behavior expected of persons in a marriage has been downgraded from monogamy to “serial monogamy,” which as of November 2016 an American male can practice with alacrity and without attention to niceties of decorum, with no worries that he will be denied election to the highest office in the land. That development has already eroded the financial and social capital available for the nurture of children, especially the most disadvantaged. Now, prominent supporters of gay marriage urge a further downgrade of marital expectations to “monogamish” (that is, open) relationships, which can only further increase family instability.<sup>50</sup> As R. R. Reno writes, “Gay marriage bids fair to be yet another moral luxury for the rich that will be paid for by the poor.”<sup>51</sup>

Still broader social implications are suggested by Lee Harris, a gay author who argued against gay marriage in the 2005 *Policy Review*. In the course of that argument, Harris wrote:

One of the preconditions of a civilization is that there is a fundamental ethical baseline below which it cannot be allowed to fall. Unless there is a deep and massive and unthinking commitment on the part of most people to the well-being not merely of their children, but of their children’s children, then the essential transgenerational duty of preserving the ethical baseline of our civilization will become a matter of hit-and-miss. It may be performed, but there is no longer any guarantee that it will be. The guarantee comes from shining examples.<sup>52</sup>

“Shining examples” is Harris’s poetic phrase for faithful monogamous couples, indeed, for couples who have ordered their lives according to the teaching of Scripture. Reflecting on such “shining examples,” Harris offered this striking comment:

---

<sup>50</sup> See Pamela Madsen, “The Monogamish Marriage: What If It’s Not Cheating to Cheat?” *Psychology Today*, July 3, 2011, at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shameless-woman/201107/the-monogamish-marriage-what-if-its-not-cheating-cheat>. On the likely social consequences of normalizing homosexual relationships suggested by the anthropological literature, see Peter W. Woods, “Sex and Consequences,” *The American Conservative*, July 28, 2003, at <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/sex-consequences/>.

<sup>51</sup> R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2016), 62.

<sup>52</sup> Lee Harris, “The Future of Tradition,” *Policy Review*, June 1, 2005, at <http://www.hoover.org/research/future-tradition>.

Even the most sophisticated of us have something to learn from the fundamentalism of middle America. For stripped of its quaint and antiquated ideological superstructure, there is a hard and solid kernel of wisdom embodied in the visceral code by which fundamentalists raise their children, and many of us, including many gay men like myself, are thankful to have been raised by parents who were so unshakably committed to the values of decency, and honesty, and integrity, and all those other homespun and corny principles. Reject the theology if you wish, but respect the ethical fundamentalism by which these people live: It is not a weakness of intellect, but a strength of character.<sup>53</sup>

The waning of the biblical marital ideal in American culture, Harris suggests, reduces the *moral* capital available in our society.

By way of illustration: Miley Cyrus, not noted for her scholarship, is nonetheless an informative cultural barometer. Several years ago, she reported, no doubt to some small acclaim for her bravery, that her orientation is “pansexual,” explaining that she is “open to every single thing that is consenting and doesn’t involve an animal and everyone is of age.”<sup>54</sup> The word *pansexual* is not Ms. Cyrus’s coinage, but should rather be credited to those who labor in the vineyards of “queer theory” and related disciplines.<sup>55</sup> By her statement “everyone is of age,” she likely indicates her openness to sexual relationships involving more than two partners; but even if she isn’t clear about that, activists for polyamory are.<sup>56</sup> That such ideas should be presented as a path to

---

<sup>53</sup> Harris, “The Future of Tradition,” at <http://www.hoover.org/research/future-tradition>.

<sup>54</sup> Joe Dziemianowicz, “Miley Cyrus: I’m pansexual, ‘change my style every two weeks,’” *New York Daily News*, August 31, 2015, at <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/miley-cyrus-pansexual-change-style-weeks-article-1.2343648>. Ms. Cyrus is at least as much victim as offender, having been supplied by activists and intellectuals with an impressive-sounding label for rationalizing unwise behavior.

<sup>55</sup> For the theoretical underpinnings of such understandings of sexuality, see especially the influential work of Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), an aim of which was “to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (viii).

<sup>56</sup> See Janet Bennion and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe, *The Polygamy Question* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016); Mark Goldfeder, *Legalizing Plural Marriage: The Next Frontier in Family Law* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2017); Carrie Jenkins, *What Love Is: and What It Could Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Elf Lyons, “A new way to love: in praise of polyamory,” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com>

enlightenment and fulfillment—especially to the young, and not only to Ms. Cyrus, but to undergraduates in the most prestigious universities in the land—calls to mind the remark of George Orwell: “One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.”<sup>57</sup>

Once the nuptial vision of the Bible is abandoned as a guide to aspiration and conduct—once, for example, procreative complementarity is abandoned as the basis for the marital relationship, which it has constituted not only in the Jewish and Christian traditions but throughout recorded civilization, until until very recently in the Netherlands—there is no rationally defensible stopping place on the way to the recognition of “pansexual” unions, as, apart from procreative complementarity, there is no relational magic in the number “two.”<sup>58</sup> Some slopes are, in fact, slippery.

Vital to the preservation and renewal of the biblical vision is its cultivation in communities bound by a shared vision of moral character, such as Alasdair MacIntyre considers in the conclusion of his book *After Virtue*.<sup>59</sup> It is unclear

---

/lifeandstyle/2017/jul/23/polyamory-new-way-to-love-men-women-sex-relationships-elf-lyons).

<sup>57</sup> George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” at [http://orwell.ru/library/essays/nationalism/english/e\\_nat](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/nationalism/english/e_nat). For an illustration of the debt such theories owe to university instruction, see Zachary Zane, “What if we thought of monogamy as a spectrum?” at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/2016/12/02/what-thought-monogamy-spectrum/jbU1wY8jR64nehFBbBIZzN/story.html>. Zane pursues the question, “Since sexuality and gender aren’t living in a binary anymore, does monogamy have to be?” His insights, derived from his “queer theory class in college” and reflection on recent polling data, include: “Monogamy often perpetuates traditional gender roles, whereas a non-monogamous relationship more often doesn’t have the same prescribed script as monogamy” (as though the roles in contemporary monogamous relationships typically involve no negotiation); “it’s completely normal, and even somewhat expected that my attractions to all genders change over my lifetime”; and “[a] life solely dedicated to one person doesn’t allow for exploration.” His studies have evidently not helped him achieve clarity on the meaning of the word *monogamous*, however, as in that case he could not entertain the lifestyle option of being “monogamous with some people but not with others.”

<sup>58</sup> See the neglected work of Harvard sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman, *Family and Civilization* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2008 [1947]).

<sup>59</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 256–63. For an observant journalist’s consideration of the need and nature of an approach to Christian community inspired by MacIntyre’s reflections on Benedict in the contemporary United States, see Rod Dreher,

whether, in the absence of a supportive cultural and legal framework, American churches can function as such communities; it is further uncertain how seriously many will try. In such an effort, supposing it is undertaken, the scholar's role is to supply information, to foster understanding, to instruct ignorance and dispel prejudice (including the prejudice of those who suppose themselves enlightened), and so to oppose what Chesterton called "the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."<sup>60</sup> It is our vocation as scholars to *preserve* the memory of that foreign country we call the Christian past, and to exhibit that within it which is vital to *conserve*.

Scholars and teachers who have been shaped and inspired by the nuptial vision of the Christian Bible now face a choice whether to conserve and commend that vision or to abandon it for the alternative vision of human flourishing offered by our brave new world. This same choice faces every school, every congregation, every teacher, and every minister associated with the Catholic Church, the Baptist Church, the Christian Church, the Churches of Christ—every church in America, that is, that hasn't already abandoned the historic Christian faith in the divine redemption of humankind from our sins, sexual and otherwise, to embrace instead what Philip Turner, writing about his own Episcopal communion, has called the "unworkable theology" of unconditional "divine acceptance," in which "Christ's death [involves] no judgment upon the human condition."<sup>61</sup>

Theologically, the conventional wisdom of the age amounts to a denial that we are created beings, formed out of dust, in the metaphor of Genesis, by One whose will and purposes for us define our good, both temporal and eternal.<sup>62</sup> If the Bible does not teach this, it cannot be said to teach anything; and

---

*The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 85.

<sup>61</sup> Philip Turner, "An Unworkable Theology," *First Things* 154 (June/July 2005): 10–12, at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/06/an-unworkable-theology>.

<sup>62</sup> This denial appears most starkly in activism on behalf of persons designated "transgendered," which defies not only Christian tradition, but also scientific understanding, sound medical and psychiatric practice, and common sense (itself increasingly rare). See especially Sherif Girgis, "Obergefell and the New Gnosticism," at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/06/obergefell-and-the-new-gnosticism>, (June 28, 2016); also Katherine Kersten, "Transgender Conformity," *First Things* 268 (December 2016): 25–31, at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/>

so, we must choose. May God sustain his church universal in faithfulness, and may he grant her teachers wisdom and courage to speak his truth in love.

---

12/transgender-conformity; Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York, Encounter Books, 2018), the argument of which is more sober and compassionate toward those experiencing gender dysphoria than the title might suggest; and Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019).



CENTER FOR  
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

*Invites you to a:*

FIRST THINGS  
LECTURE

# The Sentimental Death of a Culture

*Presented by* Carl R Trueman

Grove City College and  
Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center

7:00 PM, Monday  
September, 19, 2022  
*Refreshments to follow.*

University Avenue  
Church of Christ  
1903 University Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78705

TO RSVP PLEASE VISIT:

[christian-studies.org/event-details/austin-first-things-lecture](http://christian-studies.org/event-details/austin-first-things-lecture)

