

Why We're Gendered Beings
Theological Reflections on the Moral and Spiritual Meaning
of Gender in Sexual Relationships¹
(Revised and expanded with new preface)

by Gary W. Deddo, Ph.D.

Preface

Sharing in Christ's ongoing ministry to anyone anywhere is always an invigorating challenge. We dare enter into it only out of our trust in him that he can find ways of making use of our efforts, our experience and our understanding, all within our limits. After all, we only ever have a few loaves and fish to hand over to him. He somehow figures out how to use them to feed five thousand.

It's good to remember that Christ's ministry always has the same shape, goal and aim no matter who we are or where we are called to join him. Christ continually extends and offers himself as Lord and Savior to those looking for new life and who are or become ready to receive that new life from him and to cast off obstacles to their receiving that new life. That new life in him is freely extended to all before anyone ever even begins to think of or want what he offers. Though his gift is free to us, it was costly to him, though he gladly paid the price. And while that gift is freely given to us, it does cost us something to receive it. We have to let go of our trust in anything that we used to depend upon to give us life. We have to repent, turn away from our false dependencies and turn in faith to receive life from Christ alone. This gift of grace in Jesus Christ is freely given, but costly to us to receive. He alone is to be trusted as our Lord and Savior.

These principles apply to all people (sinners all), including those who struggle with same-sex attraction. We share in Jesus' ongoing ministry to those who experience this struggle by reminding them (even as we remind ourselves) who Jesus is and what he has done for us and will continue doing for us and in us. This Christ-centered life will be characterized by a repentance in which we die to ourselves daily and are renewed by receiving his life daily. It involves a dynamic and continual interaction with our Lord, letting go of all that hinders our receiving fully and freely from him. That is, it involves a daily relationship with him, staying in step with him, staying in fellowship and communion with him, following him where he takes us. It also involves allowing him to bring us back on his pathway when we have veered off to the right or to the left. This is the life lived in and by God's grace, which he extends to us day-by-day. Our calling to minister to those who struggle with same-sex attraction means coming along side of them to encourage, equip and assist them in that relationship with Jesus Christ, pointing them continually to him so that they can joyfully follow him daily.

Admittedly that's a general description of how we may share in Christ's ministry to those with same-sex attraction. But I believe it is true in all cases. However, each case has its own distinct challenges. No two persons are exactly alike. Jesus has his own relationship with each one. And

¹ This is a much revised and somewhat expanded version of the article "Why We're Gendered Beings: Theological Reflections on Sexual Identity" by the same author.

while he accepts each one where they are, he is taking them to where he is going and along a pathway that accounts for their uniqueness. So, while the Leader of this journey is known to us and the end is also identifiable, the path to be taken is not so predictable. That means we have to stay in touch, be in communication with our Lord and Savior and come along side each person to see how we might walk with them in the way Jesus is taking them. Each disciple is a custom-fashioned person, God's workmanship, not ours. There are no "generic" persons. We must remain prayerfully discerning each step of the way—and be prepared for surprises and disappointments. We too will have to be renewed in our faith and repentance. We too will be drawn to grow in our trust relationship with him.

Now, while sharing in Christ's ministry to those dealing with same-sex attraction has the same direction and goal as ministry to anyone, it does have particular challenges that we must take into account. Both Scripture and those who have been involved in ministry to those with same-sex attraction have wisdom from which we can benefit. They can help us prepare to serve, although, in the end, we'll find that ministry to each individual will have to be customized as the Lord directs.

So what are the particular challenges?

The first is that we need to lead with a faith, hope and love that arises out of our own lives of trust and repentance in our relationship to Jesus. We have to trust more in his work in their lives than in our working. We'll have to hope more in what he can do than in what we can do. We'll have to want their best and feed their faith because we know that Jesus loves them and wants their best far more than we do. And he knows what is their best each step of the way, better than we do. We'll have to discover what those steps are. When we lead and are motivated out of Christ's own faith, hope and love, we will direct them to God's grace found in Jesus; for his ministry of self-giving is a ministry of grace.

Now, leading out of the grace of our Lord Jesus means that we don't lead with a word of law, a word of condemnation, or even a word about sin or repentance, although we may be tempted to start there. Sometimes those we minister to in this kind of situation may actually expect us to start there. Some of them may think that's where God wants to start. But we need to start with the Good News and then keep it at the center, at all times, never leaving it behind. Why? Because the Good News is Jesus Christ himself. He is the Grace of God. So ministry starts and stays oriented around the North Star of who he is and what he has come to do for us and in us by his Spirit. And that elicits and even generates faith in those who hear. Hearing the Good News of God, our Lord and Savior who has come to forgive, rescue, heal and transform us also, by the Spirit, conceives in us the response of repentance, a willingness to die to our false old selves to receive the new self, regenerated in him.

God's grace in Jesus does accept us where we are—and then takes us where Jesus is going. It puts us on a pathway of following Jesus where he leads. It puts us in a living relationship of receiving from him and responding to him. God would not be gracious were he to leave us in the condition in which he found us. Sometimes it's hard to trust that grace will be sufficient to call forth the response, but that's our problem, really. We musn't fall into the trap of switching our message from Good News to Bad News, from Grace to Law, when we falter in our faith in the Grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Receiving Grace is indeed costly. We have to die to ourselves, one day at a time, in order to continually receive our new life from him. Grace does lead in a certain direction, towards more and more life in him. It does involve a life that opens up to more and more receptiveness to receive him into our lives, to a growing faith in him, to hope because of him and to love for him. And as we abide in him in this way, our lives will bear fruit that witness to his work of grace in our lives.

It can be helpful to have a fairly well informed sense of the direction that Jesus leads his beloved sheep on, towards abundant life. Scripture mainly tells us who God is. But we are also given descriptions of where the pathway will lead as we follow him. We are not left clueless. So, for instance, we know that it leads to the fruit of the Spirit. But we are also informed of ways that take us off Jesus' pathway to life. It's at least as important, if not more important, to know how to stay on the path, than how we might be pulled off the path. But in the end it's best to be aware of both. And Scripture describes both: the path to right relationships and the path to wrong, life-robbing relationships, which is sin.

Thus, Scripture tells us both what sin is, and how to share in Christ's ministry to sinners. And we have to get both right. It is too easy to assume that if we're dealing with sinners, we should switch from Grace to "minister" out of Law, utilizing guilt, fear and anxiety rather than faith, hope and love. We are tempted to lead with a word of warning and condemnation rather than a word of love, forgiveness and hope in Jesus. But going down that road means failing to share in Christ's continuing ministry to sinners. Any discussion of sin ought always to be an extension of the grace of Christ offered in love, faith and hope. This is a challenge for us, since many models of ministry would have us switch gears into the Law mode, which means conditional grace and earned grace at best, or simply a word of condemnation, at worst. We might be especially tempted to switch to the Law mode of ministry when we think a particular sin is more egregious than others or when we have little experience or understanding of the particular temptations of certain people, like those who experience same-sex attraction. So we need to be on the lookout for that.

One other aspect of ministering to persons dealing with these feelings is that the issue is being publicly debated and thus has social and political ramifications. The wider cultural issue involves the proper use of political power and governmental authority. This gets us into the issue of the so-called "culture wars." It raises the question as to what is the place and role of the church in relationship to government, especially in a democratic society. And that is an issue, in itself, that needs to be sorted out. Unfortunately, the same people are affected both by governmental policies and practices as well as the church's more direct and personal ministry. But the church, while having the same fundamental message to anyone, has a different role in relationship to the governing authorities than in its own sphere of ministry. We won't be taking up that issue here, but we should note that persons are affected by both influences. In this paper we will focus on the church's ministry to individual people, even while taking into account their connection to the wider culture. But we will not address the important issue of how and what the church as a whole or its individual members should say about the social, political implications. I can simply say that whatever we do or say should flow out of the same concern and spirit as does any ministry done in the name of Jesus Christ.

The reason I have written this essay is because I find that there has been much confusion and debate within the church over at least the past 45 years concerning the church's response to people who experience same-sex attraction. That response has often been the opposite of a grace- and Christ-oriented ministry. The church's response has often reflected a harmful disconnect between, on the one hand, the permissions and the prohibitions of biblical teaching; and, on the other, the mind, character and purposes of God. A response like that disconnects the embodied grace of God shown in Jesus Christ from the commands of God. The truth is that the One who commands is the same One who redeems and blesses. The commands of God cannot be properly understood or applied apart from faith, hope and love for Who God has revealed himself to be. And this goes for any and every biblical description of righteousness or unrighteousness. This means that those commands involving gender and sexual relations cannot be properly understood apart from God's purposes for making us gendered beings in the first place. And of course, without this wider perception, it is difficult to discern what faithful ministry should be like to those who struggle in areas that involve their gender. Any assistance we might give to help them (and ourselves) discover and follow the pathway Christ is taking them could be misleading if we don't know the purpose of the Lord behind the permissions and prohibitions given in Scripture. What should be clear, then, is that they are designed to help us walk in ways that fill us with God's grace and lead to life and life more abundantly.

The following essay addresses only a limited aspect of Jesus Christ's ongoing ministry. Its focus is how we can share in what our Lord is doing to minister to people experiencing same-sex attraction. This topic leads us to consider related issues, including gender and sexual relationships. As we look into these issues, we must keep in mind that though this is an important topic, it is not the central concern of Jesus' ongoing ministry. That concern is the building up, through the Spirit, the faith, hope and love of God in anyone who wants to find their life in him. Nevertheless, I trust that by the mercy of God, this essay may prepare at least some to better minister in his name to those who experience same-sex attraction.

Gary W. Deddo, March 25, 2013

Over the past thirty years or so, unrest and discussion on the nature of sexuality has boiled over into outright confrontation and polarization. The moral dimension of the sexual revolution has not been resolved even if, in practice, the movement away from traditional patterns has slowed. This is especially evident in the conflict over the moral status of same-sex attraction (SSA) and behavior.

My own inclination over the years has been to serve as a reconciler, to attempt to demonstrate compassion and seek for a thoroughly Christian understanding of sexuality in general and same-sex attraction in particular, in a way that ministers the grace of God to all his people while remaining faithful to the biblical word and witness. I felt that avoiding the issue altogether was not the only or even the best way to avoid falling into the trap of self-righteousness. I became convinced that the danger of magnifying a particular sin out of proportion could be more than adequately addressed if the full measure of the grace and glory God was allowed to shine forth.

It seemed to me, then, that what was needed was a biblical and Christ-centered approach to sinners as well as a biblical and Christian definition of sin.

Before we begin, I must note that this paper does not spell out a biblical and Christ-centered approach to sinners. Treatment of that topic may be even more fundamental for some than what follows. I know that such a Christ-centered approach cannot be assumed in every case, and I am aware of the danger that some may read what follows and want to use it for ammunition to attack or condemn others. But that would be hypocrisy of a high order. Heralding a biblical view of sin while exhibiting an unbiblical treatment of sinners (which we all are) is undoubtedly a greater sin than the misuse of our sexuality. I cannot condone that, and I certainly do not want to contribute to it. But I also know that even if I were to take the time to include an exhortation on a biblical approach to ministering to sinners in Christ's name, I would still not be able to prevent some from misusing what follows. So with that caveat and confession, I will proceed.

My most recent round of reflection upon the subject of human sexuality has been propelled not by a personal preoccupation with the subject (I would rather avoid controversy), but by the exigencies of pastoral care for persons struggling with these issues, by seemingly unavoidable debate and confrontation on the secular university campuses where I and colleagues have ministered, by my past ministerial membership in the Presbyterian Church USA denomination and by invitations to study and make presentations about it in other venues. Indeed you have before you the fourth revision.

Each of the several phases of concerted reflection traversed throughout my life and ministry has been fruitful. However, over some 15 years of research and interaction, my thoughts and convictions have crystallized in an unanticipated way and will probably continue to require refinement for another 10 years. The insights and conclusions I came to, while not inconsistent with my original thoughts, became at one point much more incisive than expected. While illuminating a clear path that I believe can and should contribute to compassionate ministry, I do not expect them to resolve our current debates. But I do offer them in the hope they might contribute to that end. More modestly, I hope that those who are still sorting things out and who are experiencing some confusion or ambiguity surrounding the issue might be helpfully served. For those who already have a settled conviction that aligns with the direction I take, I would trust that they might find some additional insight that gives a greater understanding and coherence to their commitments. For those who might still disagree, I would hope that it at least becomes clear that the position taken here arises out of a comprehensive consideration of God's purposes for everyone and does not simply arise from or depend upon a simple legalistic and vindictive understanding of a few isolated commands found in the Bible.

The Thesis

So, let me be upfront about where this reflection will take us. My quest to find guidance for the church, including the moral and spiritual benefit of any person who identifies himself/herself as gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transsexual (GLBT), led me to the conclusion that *sexual relations between those of the same sex (gender) cannot faithfully reflect God's purposes for why humanity was created with gender.*

Consequently, those who want to follow in God's way as offered to them in Jesus Christ should not expect that the abundant life he would give them would lead in that direction. There is also good reason to believe that those who want to justify and persist in following in that way, insisting on it as an equally valid expression of their sexuality, will not experience a growing and fulfilling freedom and joy in their spiritual journey, but will add additional burden and tribulation to their lives.²

For those who find their same-sex attraction unwanted, this should be a hopeful and encouraging word. He will set us free. I personally know of some who have experienced that freedom. However, as all Christians know (or at least should know), the way may well be exceedingly challenging and humbling. It seems that God does not often grant his beloved children quick freedom from their "besetting" sins. Rather he seems to call us all to live in and by his grace each and every day. He prevents us from fooling ourselves that we don't really need grace, especially the grace of his sanctifying work that transforms us "in his own time, in his own way, at his own pace."³

We certainly cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we can change ourselves (even if able to modify our behaviors) by sheer acts of will or the sincerity of our commitment. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said we'd need to take up our cross daily. Neither was the apostle Paul when he taught that we'd need to die to our old (false) selves as we become new creations in him. But Paul was nevertheless confident that Christ would indeed, at least in the end, be victorious in freeing us from those corpses of death that cling to us. And we know the way that led Jesus to his Resurrection and Ascension had to pass through the Cross first. So we both die in Christ and are raised in Christ, daily. That is the "normal" Christian life, no matter which temptations we wrestle with or what behaviors we regard as sins or not.

Unfortunately most of us fight our Lord and Savior on taking this (his) pathway. And we find it difficult to graciously accompany others on such a journey. While we may think there is (or should be) an easier way, I don't find biblical revelation teaching us that there is, or that we should expect one. It may be that attempting to find a different way really amounts to wanting less grace from God, not more, and insisting that he love us less, not more. Thankfully, even if we are faithless, he remains faithful.

Having provided, now, some context for what follows, let me lay out in detail the key elements which cumulatively lead to these conclusions.

² I admit that there may indeed be an experience of relief and release upon an initial turn in that direction—one that God may perhaps grant them as an interim grace, especially if they have been approaching their situation as one that could and should be resolved by sheer will power and determination or by momentary miraculous divine intervention. However, I do not think there is reason to believe that God's grace will leave them there indefinitely.

³ A quotation from a friend of more than 32 years who for the first 24 of those years I knew him struggled with same-sex attraction and temptation. Only in the past eight years of that journey has he experienced significant release after seeking and finding God's grace, healing and transformation in many other areas of his life first. He truly knows what it means to live daily by the grace of God. It is to him I dedicate this essay.

It seems to me that what had been lacking in my own reflection and in the literature in general were two things: a comprehensive context within which to frame the question and the proper formulation of the question that would lead to greater illumination rather than further ambiguity and obfuscation.

First, the discernment of what constitutes the right use of sexual relations only becomes clear when pursued within the context of a comprehensive understanding of God's purposes for our being gendered persons. Interpreting the commands of God outside of a grasp of God's purposes constitutes interpreting them out of context, a bad hermeneutical habit. Unfortunately, most discussions have focused on the particular texts that give commandment regarding sexual behavior, or simply involve an attempt to either defend or dismiss them. Such restricted discussions have hindered comprehension of those commandments and have failed to provide clarity in the debate. Consequently, much of my reflection and study has concentrated on attempting to grasp the reason--the divinely given purpose--for our being gendered beings in the first place.

As to the second concern, regarding asking the most illuminating and core question, I want to be clear and precise since much unhelpful confusion arises at this point. We're talking about same-sex sexual acts, sexual relations. There is no debate about the goodness and appropriateness of same-sex relationships themselves, per se. No one objects to same-sex friendships that do not include sexual interaction and do not indulge same-sex sexual attraction. The controversy is strictly limited to the nature, meaning, significance and moral, spiritual status of sexual involvement between two persons of the same sex or gender. Because so wordy, I will sometimes use as short hand "same-sex relations" but remember that it stands for sexual involvement in those relations. *That's the only thing being questioned.* That's the point of the controversy. That's the issue raised by biblical teaching.

So then, the proper question to ask within this debate is whether or not same-sex sexual relations are to be regarded as moral and spiritual equivalents to opposite-sex sexual relations. Those who claim that they are indeed morally and spiritually equivalent present the deepest challenge to the traditional biblical understanding. But most helpfully they have also identified the heart of the issue. *The failure to establish equivalence means the collapse of the whole argument and issue. What follows is primarily a response to those who believe they can and must justify and dogmatically insist that same-sex sexual relations are indeed equivalent to opposite-sex sexual relations and so ought to be given in the church an identical status.* Most often this is demanded by insisting that same-sex couples be given nothing more or less than the same "right" to marriage⁴ that opposite-sex couples now have and that they also have the "right" to ordination.⁵

⁴ It is a distortion to say that those who have a same-sex orientation are being denied the right to marry. They have exactly the same right. They can all marry. No one is preventing them. They simply are being denied "the right" to change the meaning of marriage so that it can apply to those of the same sex. The public issue is the meaning of marriage not the right to marriage.

⁵ We should note that there is no "right" to ordination for anyone in the church, and ordination is certainly not a test of acceptance or belonging to a church. If it were, then all ought to be ordained and none "excluded." Of course, not all who are involved in same-sex (sexual) relations make these their issues. Taking such a view or cause may have little to do with how they think or

An approach to adjudicating the rival claims that calls for a direct comparison will bring out the true nature and meaning of each claim and get to the heart of the issue. The question of moral equivalence cannot be answered, however, except in terms of the more comprehensive question of the purpose for our being gendered beings at all. Simply defending or dismissing biblical commands will not get us very far at all.

Let me clarify the issue by emphasizing what is not the issue. And this is exceedingly important. We will not take up the matter of what difference it makes if same-gender couples have entered into permanent relationships. Friendships can be permanent, life-long and on purpose. That is not problematic. Again, the question concerns same-gender relations that include sexual relations and whether they can be regarded as moral, spiritual equivalents to opposite-gendered sexual relations, whether in life-long partnerships or not. The moral question of whether sexual relations ought to take place exclusively within a life-long committed relationship will not be explored here. The moral, spiritual equivalence question regarding sexual relations is prior to the moral status of permanent or temporary partnership involving sexual relations (or for that matter the age of those so involved or the number of those involved). We are asking a more fundamental question. If the conclusion is they are equivalent, then permanent relations will be equivalent to those that are permanent and temporary ones will be equivalent to those that are temporary. If not equivalent, they will not be equivalent whether in permanent relations or temporary. Furthermore, the question of civil or legal rights for those in permanent relationships is another question entirely. The answer to our question will undoubtedly have some, but not identical, bearing on what the church should recommend to the public and government. But that, again, is a secondary issue that follows upon our more fundamental question worked out in the context of the church as it lives under the authority of Scriptural revelation.

Why Are We Gendered Beings?

The answer to the question as to why we are gendered beings must be gathered from the whole biblical testimony. We must begin in Genesis, but we cannot end there, for the meaning of the teaching found in Genesis leaves some things ambiguous that later biblical revelation fills out. Our being gendered is a deep mystery not easily discerned. A comprehensive grasp of Scripture is required to ascertain the spiritual meaning of our being gendered beings. An understanding of the nature of God, the person of Christ, the nature of the church, the nature of human being in relation to God and to creation will all contribute something to our understanding of any biblical

feel or why or how they got involved in such behavior or relationships. So what is presented in this paper *does not represent the starting place* for ministering or counseling someone struggling with same-sex attraction or in a gay or lesbian relationship. A lot of patient compassionate listening has to happen first to even find out where to start to minister the grace and truth of God to them in love. And in my experience, the discussion that follows in this essay is not the right place to start and doing so won't be helpful to them. Beginning with what is concluded here is most likely to put them further on the defensive, alienate them and lead them to believe that you don't care about them, but only about being right and putting others in their place! Consider this work like a GPS satellite orbiting a hundred miles over our everyday lives and ministry but that still orients us and keeps us from getting lost when hurricanes and storms rage on the surface of the planet threatening to blow us off course or totally obscure our vision, making it difficult to stay on the right path.

prohibitions or prescriptions of behavior. We can, however, gather several clues to the answer by beginning with the Genesis accounts found in chapters one and two. Here is the key passage from Genesis 1:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:26-28; 31 NRSV throughout except as noted)

Gender—the result of God's deliberate and purposeful act

First of all, we see that God's act of creating humanity is deliberate, is done purposely, not accidentally. It is even the result of divine deliberation—"Let us make." And just what did God have in mind? That humanity would somehow "image" its creator. This purpose, not granted to any other dimension of creation, is given uniquely to humanity. There is something about the shape and nature of humanity that images, reflects or bears witness to the creator. It's not clear just what this means at this point in the story. But we are told much of what will be involved.⁶

Gender and being created in the image of God

The humanity that God deliberately creates to bear his image is created with two genders. So whatever "in our image" means it includes the whole of humanity in its differentiation as male and female. It is also clear that it involves their being together in such a way that they have offspring, progeny. We speak of such being together as sexual relations. The biblical way of speaking about this is found a bit later: "Now Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived..." (Genesis 4:1 NKJV). Their lives together are to be fruitful by bringing forth more human life, multiplying human life. But their procreation, in turn it seems, is, through their keeping and oversight, to contribute to the fruitfulness of the other forms of living things according to their distinct "kinds" which are also to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:20-25).

Creation of gender differentiation is declared by God to be very good

⁶ Some have restricted the meaning of the image of God to the gendered nature of humanity. Others have said there is no association with gender here, but rather it is connected with dominion and caretaking. It seems to me that these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, being created according to the image of God necessarily involves both dimensions, for they are intrinsically interrelated. First, the procreation (fruitfulness) of humanity requires them to be differentiated into two sexes. And their fruitfulness, which is a product of their being gendered, seems in turn, to be the means by which humanity as a whole contributes to the fruitfulness of the rest of creation. Human fruitfulness and the fruitfulness of all of creation are intrinsically interlocked. Paul's thought in Romans seems to bear this out: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God..." (Romans 8:19).

Up until this point, God had declared the previous aspects of creation “good.” Now at this final juncture in the unfolding of creation, God emphatically designates it “very good” (Genesis 1:31). We have here reached a high point. God’s relationship with humanity as his image, the relationship within humanity between man and woman and their resulting fruitfulness and, finally, their relationship with all the rest of living creation in a way that contributes to its fruitfulness, all are very good. It is this dynamic web of structured or ordered relationships that result in abundant life that brings creation to its “finish” or completion (Genesis 2:1). It is within this web of relationships that the whole of humanity, as men and women, fulfill their calling as those who bear the image of their Creator.

Genesis 2, the backstory to God’s deliberate and purposeful differentiation of humanity

Unlike the first chapter, in Genesis 2 humanity is at first presented as being without gender. And, rather than saying that he was created “in the image,” humanity’s uniqueness is conveyed in the fact that on this creature alone, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and he became a living being.” A connection between humanity and the rest of creation is made when we find out that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). It is only after this mandate is set out that the differentiation of humanity into male and female is revisited, although now presented in much greater detail. Here are the relevant verses:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”.... So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh (Genesis 2:18, 21-24).

Here the author, even more strongly than in Genesis 1, highlights the deliberateness of God’s act to form humanity into two genders. We are given the “backstory” to the Genesis 1 account, starting with an undifferentiated, non-gendered humanity. But God declares his own judgment that humanity alone (singular) is “not good.” And this comes as a shock, since in striking contrast to the declarations of everything being “good” and even “very good,” this is the only time that we hear of anything being “not good.” God then sets out to rectify this situation. First he assists Adam to gain the same recognition of his condition by parading before him all the various kinds of created living things. In this way, he comes to see that “for the man there was not found a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:20). Then God creates Eve out of him and presents her to him. Being adequately prepared, he now sees that his aloneness has been removed. He now has a fit partner, accomplished through the formation of another gender within humanity by his gracious God. The creation of another of his kind, yet “over and against him,” is cause for great rejoicing, “at last...” That which was “not good,” has now become “very good.”

It requires no stretch of the theological imagination to say that the creation of gender differentiation is not only good, but that it is emphatically good since it is deliberately contrasted with a humanity having no such differentiation. It also clearly demonstrates the exceeding

goodness of God expressed towards humanity, a form of his grace and, I would think, an expression of his love. This passage, when seen as an expansion on Genesis 1, would also indicate that this formation of humanity is related to what it means to be created in the image of God. So in the end, it would be proper to say that humanity has been prepared in this particular way to reflect the goodness and glory of God. In shorthand, they were created male and female to give God glory and to do so by making use of their gender differentiation.

One could not conclude, even restricting our consideration to these Genesis accounts, that we are gendered beings for no good reason at all or simply out of biological necessity. Rather it raises and begins to answer the question, Why? For what purpose are we gendered beings?

Aloneness and true partnership

Light on the good purpose of being gendered is shed most brightly in Genesis 2. There we see the creation of gender in connection with God's own recognition of the problem of aloneness. The fact that there were other animals, plants and the physical surroundings near and far, were no answer to Adam's solitude. Adam lived in the presence of these things, and even God was with him. And yet, their difference from him still left Adam alone in a significant way. It was of such concern that God taught Adam to recognize this deficiency and prepared him for God's own resolution. Woman with man was the answer to human aloneness. Fellowship, of the good kind God intends, takes its highest form in the bi-polarity of man and woman. True human togetherness requires persons who are the same—human—yet who are decidedly different, other, distinct, not the same—gendered. If woman were other but not human, man would remain alone as he was with the animals. The otherness would be too great. If she was not the opposite gender, but human, then she (it?) would not be a true other. She would have been too similar. Adam would have been left by himself no matter how many of them there were. Non-gendered otherness would not have addressed human aloneness. Gender, then, is the good differentiation within humanity that provides the basis for a true fellowship: a unity and togetherness of those who are also significantly differentiated and other.

The origin of marriage in the life of Israel

In the Genesis 2 account, an important final step is taken. God's provision leads somewhere. A purposefully gendered humanity leads to their leaving their birth families and cleaving to each other, thereby creating another familial bond that supersedes the former ties. This story culminates in revealing to the reader where marriage came from. It was made possible by God's good and deliberate provision. It was no accident. It turns out that marriage is built into the purposeful fabric of humanity, created according to the image of its creator. In this account I think it cannot be denied that gender differentiation is presented as what made marriage itself possible. And it seems clear that marriage, as represented in Adam and Eve, is presented as the high or focal point of human relationships. In the constellation of a myriad of good relationships within creation, and without denigrating them, the relationship of Adam and Eve in marriage is given a unique place of honor in the purposeful divine scheme of created existence. *Marriage, then, is given a special place for the fulfilling of God's purposes for humanity which images their creator.*

In summary we can say that the goodness of gender, which images and glorifies God, as depicted in Genesis, is essential to human communion, which overcomes aloneness, is central to

partnership in caretaking of the earth, is vital for procreation and grounds the human reflection of God's own covenant love in marriage.

We can conclude, then, at least in a preliminary fashion, that being gendered is good because it provides a basis for humanity, as male and female, to reflect being created according to the image of God and so a basis for glorifying God. This conclusion, of course raises other questions. In what way does gender serve as a basis for imaging/glorifying God? Can this connection be more fully discerned beyond simply being affirmed?

There are a number of crucial relationships given profound consideration throughout Scripture. On the side of relationships within creation we find that direction for proper relations between men and women is a prominent one. But we also find sustained consideration of the relationships of parents with children, of one neighbor to another, among the nations and of humanity with non-personal creation. Relationships involving God range from God's relationship to creation in general; to God's relationship with Israel and the nations; to humanity in and through Jesus Christ; between Jesus and the Church, his Body; to relationship between members of the church and between those in the church and those not yet worshipping God through Christ.

In many, if not all of these relationships, the pattern of relations God set up between men and women seems archetypal or paradigmatic. To leap ahead, we might expect that if all these relationships are to be forms of love, then there should be similarities among them that constitute their being loving. And if the marital relationship as depicted in Genesis is indeed a special, intensified and exemplary form of love, then it would stand to reason that the pattern shown there would find analogies in those other relationships. *So the rest of this essay will consider, in turn, a number of these relationships as presented in Scripture, especially where the marital pattern of love is viewed as being exemplary or paradigmatic. It will become evident that in each of these relationships the differentiation of gender found in humanity is reflected in these other relationships, and, in fact, such a differentiation is essential for them to be right and loving.*

We can start by quickly reviewing the Genesis accounts for they can still yield a little more insight.

Men and women as complements in relation to one another

I think the Genesis accounts have more still to yield. They show not only the origin of the gendered nature of humanity but also indicate the outworking of that fellowship between them. They are partners working together. Woman, as it turns out, is the companion⁷, "meet" or "fit" or "right," for man. They are complements one to another. Being gendered is essential to their being complementary. Each brings to the relationship what the other does not have. If the other were identical, there would be no need for that other, no need and no possibility for complement, for a true partnership. Simply relating to another non-gendered human being would not have served God's purposes for his images nor for the kind of human partnership of complements that God envisioned. The complementary nature of their opposite genders is intrinsic to their not

⁷The Hebrew, often translated "partner for him" or "helper that is fit for him," is best rendered "a complement who stands face to face over against him."

being alone. There is a quality of fellowship and communion that is only possible by their being differentiated by gender.

The common task of humanity in relation to creation

On the basis of this good complementary fellowship they are given tasks to accomplish together. It seems that they have one calling that requires two different genders to fulfill. First, they are to care for the earth, the plant life and the animal life. They are to do so in such a way that life leads to greater life, so that it is multiplied and so fills the earth. The earth is to be, as a result, full of life!

The common task of procreation

Adam and Eve are themselves to be a channel of life, by means of procreation. Their life together is to give rise to yet other lives (offspring). The differentiation of gender is of course indispensable for fulfilling this task. Of course we do not mean absolutely indispensable. There are forms of life which involve non-sexual reproduction or in which a single organism possesses both kinds of gametes needed for reproduction of their kind. Human reproduction involving two distinct individuals with different genders exists by the deliberate decision of God. Apparently this form of relationship is needed for humanity to image their Creator. And given the covenant-love nature of marriage founded from the beginning, we can go on to surmise that it must be essential for human relations to reflect the love of God in this unique way. Gender differentiation in covenant love that expresses itself sexually and has the potential for procreation uniquely displays something about God's love.

We may note in passing that since procreation is mentioned in close relationship with the calling to care for creation, that procreation itself also would contribute to that end. As human life multiplies, its ability to nurture and keep the rest of creation also multiplies.

In this twofold way, the genderedness of their being serves as an essential basis for them to accomplish the purposes of God. God did not just give them a task but made provision for their own participation in that good, life-giving purpose. Humanity glorifies God and images God as gender-differentiated humanity gives, preserves, and perfects life in a way that mirrors God's own relationship with creation.

God's covenant love for Israel mirrored in marriage between a man and woman

But can we see more particularly how their relationship reflects something of God's kind of love? To do that, we'll have to recall God's relation to Israel, the church and all humanity as expressed throughout Scripture in terms of its understanding of marriage. As noted earlier, the relationship of Adam and Eve was to be paradigmatic for Israel's understanding of marriage since it stands at the origin of it and represents God's purposes for it. In the Genesis passages, the characteristics of marriage highlighted are exclusivity and permanence, expressed through the ideas of leaving and cleaving to one another. Throughout the Old Testament, God's design for marriage is filled out further. The permanence and exclusivity of marriage is summed up in the quality of faithfulness, which, it seems, is the primary characteristic of the marriage relationship. The making and keeping of a covenant is also used to characterize this unique relationship. Covenant-keeping includes promising/vowing, steadfast love and exclusivity. The violation of such a marital bond is characterized as unfaithfulness, harlotry/whoredom, adultery and divorce.

Men, as well as women, are indicted for violating this bond. In the New Testament, we find the same view persisting, with perhaps a little more emphasis on love but no less regard for faithfulness, permanence and exclusivity.⁸

God's relationship with Israel is described in much the same terms. God establishes his relationship unilaterally by making a covenant, a promise: "I will be your God and you shall be my people." And what God establishes is a permanent, everlasting and steadfast love. The most comprehensive quality of this relationship is faithfulness. It includes exclusivity on the part of Israel. While God remains faithful, Israel's violation of the unilaterally established covenant is described as unfaithfulness, harlotry/whoredom/prostitution, committing adultery and breaking of the covenant. God's faithfulness to his steadfast covenant love is so permanent that when broken from the human side, God renews it from his own side, again and again. God remains faithful to his promise. In the book of Hosea, God's covenant love is to be represented (imaged) in the relationship of Hosea with his unfaithful wife Gomer, by taking her back again and again after her "harlotries." In the New Testament, Paul speaks in the same way of God's promises or covenant being irrevocable (Romans 11:29). God's faithful love is prominent throughout.

In the parallel descriptions noted above, we find that the quality of relationship God has with his people is expected to be imaged or mirrored uniquely and comprehensively in human marriage between a man and woman. But an even closer comparison is made in both Old and New Testaments between God's love for his people and human marriage. In several places God's relationship with Israel is identified as being a marriage. In Jeremiah 31:32 we find an example of this direct connection. God will renew his covenant with Israel, but, "It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD."⁹ God

⁸ Here is a sampling of these passages: "You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth" (Malachi 2:14-15). "And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy" (Hosea 2:19). "But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment [about divorce] for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate"' (Mark 10:5-9).

⁹ See also Isaiah 54:6, "For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God," and Ezekiel 16:8, "I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine." Cf. Ezekiel 16:61, "Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you." In the situation of a violation, see Jeremiah 3:20, "'Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel,' says the LORD," and Jeremiah 3:6, "The LORD said to me in the days

directs Hosea to conduct his relationship with Gomer as a kind of parable that images God's relationship with Israel. So Hosea says to his unfaithful wife, "And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD" (Hosea 2:19-20). Perhaps most poignantly, the entire book of Song of Songs celebrates marital love of a man and woman, not only for the sake of human marriage, but as a reflection of God's love for his people.¹⁰ In the New Testament, marriage is presented as the highest and strongest form of reflection of God's relationship to his people, the church. This is especially clear in Paul's deriving the ethical import for marriage directly from Christ's relationship to the church. Note also the reference back to Genesis 2 in the Ephesians 5 passage.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband (Ephesians 5:25-33).

A final element to touch on is that just as Adam and Eve's relationship is to be fruitful, so God's relationship with his people is also a fruitful one, as noted in Genesis 9:12, "God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations,'" and Genesis 17:7, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." Also note Leviticus 26:9, "I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you." God has a covenantal relationship with the entire earth and its living things as well that results in fruitfulness, the multiplication of life.

God's love for his people mirrored in marriage

With this quick overview in mind, let's now pull these strands together to see how the particular quality of covenant love of man and woman has been selected by the biblical authors to specially reflect the nature of God's covenant relationship with his people. God has entered into an irrevocable covenant relationship with his people. What role does the gendered nature of humanity play in depicting this? Human marriage undoubtedly reflects or images a faithful, irrevocable togetherness in covenant love. But it also embodies a differentiation—a non-interchangeability and a true interdependence. It embodies in a creaturely form the same truth of

of King Josiah: 'Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there?'"

¹⁰ There is no reason to play one of these elements against the other, having to choose between them. The history of interpretation both in Judaism and in Christianity upholds both aspects.

God's covenant love for humanity. God is not humanity; humanity is not God. Humanity cannot give God what God can give humanity. They are utterly different, completely non-interchangeable, yet there is a unity and communion between God and his people. The bipolarity of man and woman glorifies the transcendent difference yet immanent (and incarnate) togetherness of God with his people. The difference images the fact that we are not God and never will be. Yet the difference in no way threatens the togetherness of God and humanity. Humanity is destined for communion with God in which the difference is not distinguished but only magnifies the glory of what would seem to be an impossible communion between two who are so different: Creator and created.

In this light, we see why throughout the biblical witness the goodness and glory of the marriage of man and woman is emphasized and exclusively celebrated. This is most notably demonstrated in the books of Song of Songs, Hosea and Ephesians. On the one hand, the biblical authors liken the marriage of man and woman to God's own relationship with humanity. On the other, they compare human adultery and prostitution to the unfaithfulness of people towards God. This comparison constitutes a major theme, especially in the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation. Clearly, the relations between men and women are intended uniquely to bear witness to the love of God for his people. Being gendered plays an essential part in reflecting the goodness and glory of the difference yet togetherness of God with his people in faithful covenant love.

God's love for creation mirrored

What role in glorifying God does gender play in the more functional aspects of the partnership of man and woman? The tasks God gave them called for them to work as companions, complementing one another.¹¹ This too, in a different dimension, reflects God's relation with his people and world. God created and gave life, but humanity was to tend that creation in such a way that life led to greater life. In this sphere there is also a complementary, differentiated partnership between humanity and God. Humanity cannot create life out of nothing, yet we can participate and be a channel of blessing and care for life. God and humanity are in no way identical or interchangeable, yet they are true partners, each contributing to the task at hand of making life abundant. The gendered nature of their human partnership in caring for creation reflects the non-interchangeable partnership of God with humanity in giving and caring for created life.

God's love for the nations through Israel

But there is yet a deeper partnership between God and humanity that leads to the deepest source of life. Israel was to be the covenant partner of God bringing salvation to all the nations. Not being the origin of that salvation, Israel itself needed God's grace and forgiveness. Even so, she was chosen for a specific task of being the channel of blessing. Each partner, God and Israel, brings to the relationship what it has. But they are not in any way interchangeable. The gendered nature of humanity and partnership reflects both the inextinguishable differentiation of God and Israel in salvation and their partnership in bringing salvation to all peoples.

¹¹This foreshadows the nature of the Church being constituted by differing members of Christ's Body in Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12.

God's love for the Church mirrored

The same is true for the Church. In partnership with Christ, we are ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5). Though we are members of the Body of Christ, we are decidedly not the Head of the Body. That too, is a non-interchangeable, asymmetrical partnership that gives life to the Body of Christ. But the church, although not the source of salvation, does contribute in its own way to God's fruitful work in the world to bring humanity back into right relationship with him.

God's love in the Church mirrored

This form of love is further reflected within the fellowship of the members of the Body. The Body is made up of differentiated members with differing gifts so that they truly need the service of the others. Paul makes a point of saying that they are not all the same. But that does not mean the members are autonomous, complete in themselves. The eye cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). They rely upon one another because they are different, they are not self-sufficient. So in these non-marital relationships, the cooperation among the different members of the Body who are not interchangeable reflect in their own way the gendered complementary nature of humanity distinguished by being male and female.

God's creating love, ex-nihilo (out of nothing) mirrored

Finally, by means of procreation humanity has the possibility of reflecting in its life the true nature of the covenant of God with his people. We cannot originate human life, yet humans can participate in God's gift of giving new biological life through procreation. Human procreation requires two genders because only in this way can it fulfill the purpose of reflecting the true partnership of God with humanity in giving biological life. God alone is the ultimate source of life. Humanity remains utterly impotent in this regard, yet God nevertheless involves humanity, in its own way, in the giving of biological life through the marital relationship of a man and woman. The differentiated and non-interchangeable relation of God with creation to originate biological life itself is mirrored in the differentiated and non-interchangeable relations of male and female in procreation. In this way human procreation, being fruitful by bringing forth new life from our God-given life, gives glory to God in a unique and paradigmatic way.¹²

God's love in Jesus Christ mirrored

The relation of man and woman bears witness to the glory of God even more ultimately as it is expressed in Jesus Christ. His own Person embodies the fulfillment of the covenant relationship between God and humanity. In the one Person of Jesus the divine and human natures meet without confusion, without separation, without fusion and without division. In Jesus, the divinity of the Son is not exchanged for the humanity, neither is the humanity swallowed up by its union with the divine nature. Nor do they become mixed or fused so as to become neither. In Jesus we are united to God so that all that is ours has also become his and all that is his is shared with us in power of the Holy Spirit. This is why the apostle Paul indicates that the glory and mystery of marriage bears witness to Christ and his Church.¹³ Thus, in the book of Revelation we see the preparation for the marriage of the Lamb of God to his Bride, the people of God. *The difference*

¹² The objection that such a criterion of fruitfulness would make childless marriages illegitimate and just as objectionable as same-sex relations is both logically and theologically fallacious. See the discussion in the latter half of this essay.

¹³Ephesians 5.

yet unity of God with humanity in Christ is imaged or reflected in the marriage of man and woman. Marriage is a witness to the glory of the Lamb God. The differentiation in that union is essential in each relationship.

Jesus as the image of the Father in God's self-revelation

Returning now to the theme of man and woman as bearers of the image, we find the New Testament has more to say on this topic. There we read that Christ is the image of God according to which we are being renewed.¹⁴ We come to know the Father through the Incarnate Son because the Son reveals the Father and makes the Father intelligible to us, who are not God but creatures. So Jesus tells us that only the Son knows the Father and only the Father knows the Son (Matthew 11: 27). And he goes on to say that we can know the Father only if Son reveals him to us. And why is that? Because, first, the Father is not visible or knowable in himself to creation. He is not a creature or a part of creation. Second, only the Son can reveal the Father because he, being the eternal Son, is the only one who shares the very nature and character of God the Father so that "if you have known me you know the Father" and "he who has seen me has seen the Father." The Son is the self-revelation of the Father, the Word of the Father, the *Logos* (rationality or intelligibility) of the Father who communicates or manifests who the Father is to us. Following this the early church taught: "Only God knows God. Only God reveals God." And the Son images and reveals the Father through both his own speaking/words and his acting/deeds since he only says what he hears his Father saying and only does what he sees his Father doing.

In this way, the Incarnate Son images the Father to us so that we may truly know the Father as we know the Son. Essential to what is revealed is the differentiation of the Father and Son. The Son is incarnate, not the Father. The Son is one with the Father but also differentiated as the Word of the Father that goes forth, that manifests and reveals the Father, making him intelligible to his creation and creature. Father and Son are not interchangeable in this work of self-revelation. The Son images the Father, but the Father does not image the Son to us.

Father and Son in partnership to bring about Creation and Redemption

The self-revelation of God is expressed in action in the two primary acts of the Father through the Son: creation and redemption. The Father sends forth his Word, his Son, who gives form to and brings about the Father's will in these two different ways. But it is the Son, not the Father, who is sent and who brings about redemption and who gathers the members of his coming kingdom. But the work they do is nevertheless a joint work; they are not separated, but each contributes in their own distinctive way to fulfilling God's purpose. The revelation of God and the action of God upon creation (which is not God) is accomplished by the Father and Son together through their non-interchangeable relations with one another. And the result of their differentiated and coordinated action is the creation and restoration of life.

Humanity was created to follow or image that pattern of the relationship between the Father and the Son, and when we do so, we mirror or bear witness to the goodness and glory of God as the fruit of the relations of the triune Persons of the one God. We have already seen how in Genesis the purpose of God is to give life and nurture that life so that it reaches its fullness. That work

¹⁴Colossians 1:15 and 3:10. See also 2 Corinthians 4:4.

was to be accomplished by Adam and Eve as partners, each contributing what is uniquely and non-interchangeably theirs in procreation and creation care.

The Son: image of the Father and our True Image

In the New Testament we find out much more about what is meant that humanity was created in or according to the image of God.¹⁵ It turns out that the Son of God, the *Logos* through whom everything was created, is that image (1 Corinthians 11:7; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15). We are to be images of him, The Image (Colossians 3:10; Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49). He is designated the original or archetype of humanity (Romans 5:14). We were patterned from the beginning according to the Son and through the Son (Colossians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 15: 45). And he is also the image of the Father. Humanity was to bear witness to the Son who bears witness to the Father. As the Son bears the likeness of the Father, so we are to bear the likeness of the Son. We are being renewed in his, the incarnate Son's, image so that we might fulfill our original calling. The one who created us according to his image is the one who restores us to conformity to his image. In these imaging relationships there is no possibility of interchangeability. Imaging requires ordered differentiation, between the Father and Son and between the Son and his humanity.

God's love in Christ for his people mirrored in marriage

The New Testament revelation has a lot to say about the kind of love that the Father has for us as revealed and enacted in the Son, his image. In the New Testament, a special meaning and significance is given to the marriage of men and women. It most poignantly mirrors God's love for his people through the Son. The marital form of covenant love is meant to be a mirror of Christ's own love for his people. In Christ, God has betrothed himself to us as his bride. The apostle Paul thinks this way in Ephesians, bringing out the particular nature of God's love for his people. Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom (Luke 5:34-35; Matthew 9:15). Marriage is also prominent in the imagery of the book of Revelation where the church is designated the bride of Christ and the consummation of all of history meets at the marriage feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:9).

In the New Testament, marriage seems to be an apt mirror because of the intended permanence or faithfulness of the covenant love exhibited in marriage and the intimacy and unique union and communion demonstrated in the marriage relationship. Also, marriage mirrors the fruitfulness of life in communion with God. Additionally, in the New Testament, marital unfaithfulness, including sexual promiscuity, is a concern because it violates the purpose of sexual intimacy in marriage to give an apt witness and sign of God's own love for his people. Intrinsic to the comparison, once again, is non-interchangeable differentiation. Christ cannot be interchanged for his church.

Jesus is the church's Savior and Lord, not vice versa. Jesus is the Head of the Body, we are the members and not vice versa. While there is declared to be a unique, one-in-spirit union that is indeed intimate (but not sexual), there is a decided differentiation and non-interchangeability. The marriage of man and woman is apt, not only because it mirrors the Son's faithfulness and

¹⁵ The Hebrew can be translated either "in the image" or "according to the image" with some reason grammatically to actually prefer the latter option of translation.

intimacy with his people, his bride, but also because it conveys that unity with non-interchangeable differentiation in the distinction and non-interchangeability of the genders.

Such a differentiation in each case displays a unique quality of love: a love that loves one who is truly other; one that creates a kind of fellowship that addresses the human problem of aloneness and can yield a unique fruitfulness in procreation. The marriage of two humans with distinct genders images a unique togetherness that most simply, powerfully and, I think we can say, most gloriously reflects the particular quality of love that God has for his people in and through his Son. Marriage of man and woman uniquely glorifies God. Differentiation and non-interchangeability are essential in both of these relationships and demonstrate a unique and poignant otherness absent from other relationships.

Our love for all of life and for each other is intended to be a faithful reflection of God's love for all of us in Jesus Christ. And Jesus reflects to us the love of the Father. Therefore, when we reflect Jesus, we manifest the glory of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The same character that shines through the Son is mirrored by us, illuminating all of life for the sake of life. In Genesis we see how the gift of marriage is a calling, which has the special purpose of bearing a unique witness to God's love. In that relationship, not only is being gendered (men and women) involved, but so too is the bond of covenantal love conveyed through sexual relations that can lead to procreation. Being gendered is essential to this unique witness of the unity and non-interchangeable differentiation of Father and Son in their life-giving and life restoring relationship with creation.

The eternal love of the Father and the Son in the Trinity

For those who can follow, there is finally the deepest mystery of our being gendered beings that we can trace out in Jesus Christ. The love which Christ has for us is a reflection of the Heavenly Father's love for him from all eternity. "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you." "As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another." Jesus indicates that these two relations are comparable, are analogous. In Jesus, not only do we have revealed the covenantal relationship of holy love between God and his people, but also the revelation of love between the Father and the Son from before the foundations of creation (John 17:24). In Jesus' conception, birth, obedience, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension and eternal reign with the Father, we see the eternal love of the Father and Son lived out before us, in perfect unity of being, will and act. What is also equally clear is the maintenance of their unconfused and differentiated personhood. The Father and Son are eternally one, yet eternally distinguished in a holy and eternal love bonded in the Holy Spirit. The divine Persons can neither be fused nor separated, confused nor interchanged.¹⁶

Jesus, in fact, extends the comparison to a third set of relationships, those among his people. He sums up all these three mirroring inter-relationships in a few simple words. In telling us, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you"—he reveals that the internal and eternal Trinitarian relationship is mirrored in the Incarnate Son's love for us. He then says, "As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another"—indicating how our love for one another ought to mirror the Incarnate Son's love for us. Captured in the simple comparative word "as," these three relationships are all to be comparable, be similar, image or mirror one another, bear witness to

¹⁶ Echoing here the proclamation of the Council of Chalcedon (451) on the Person of Christ.

each other. And in that way, our love will glorify God—it will be of the same sort or pattern and will point to its ultimate source and meaning. We will be fulfilling God's purpose for us to bear his image. Holy love has the same form or design in each of these relationships. So, the original unity and difference, togetherness and otherness, out of which we were created was that of the Triune relations.

As a special calling, human relationships involving sexual relations have their own particular way of bearing witness to the holy love of the Trinity. Faithfully imaging these divine relationships in this particular relationship requires that the sexual expression of love follows the same pattern or form of love demonstrated in the Triune relations. And these relations are in turn mirrored in God's relationship to humanity in Christ. *This pattern must apply to what makes these human relations unique, namely, the sexual aspect. Otherwise the aspect of sexual behavior is made exempt from imaging God's kind of love, even if the other non-sexual aspects of the relationship are required to so image holy love.* The inconsistency of criteria used to determine the right form of love in different aspects of the relationship ought to be sufficient to raise serious questions about such an approach.

Humanity was created as man and woman to offer a unique paradigmatic expression of holy love through sexual relations that reflect the glory of the divine Trinity of Father and Son in the Spirit. The gendered nature of humanity is designed expressly for bearing witness to and glorifying God's own triune relations of holy loving. This is ultimately why, then, "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'... So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27).

So why were we created with gender?

Why then were we created gendered beings? In short, in order to glorify God by demonstrating, bearing witness to and imaging the unique quality of God's covenant love. And the most concrete and poignant human form of such covenant faithfulness is found in marriage as Israel understood it and as Jesus fulfilled it. In that form, humanity as a whole has the privilege of manifesting that quality of covenant love most intensively, comprehensively and yet simply. This imaging requires that sexual relations take place within the bounds of a permanent and exclusive covenant of love between two persons of opposite gender where there is the potential for the bearing of new life. If any element of this quality of love is absent from a sexual relationship, that relationship fails to fully image God's kind of love, and thus fails to fulfill God's purposes for humanity as gendered beings when expressed through sexual union.

In summary, when sexual relations take place without regard for non-interchangeable gender differentiation, a very different quality of covenant love is imaged. Same-sex sexual relations, even if carried out within a permanent commitment, fail to reflect in the way that opposite-gender sexual relations do, the unity and difference, togetherness and otherness, that is essential to God's covenant faithfulness expressed in every dimension of God's relationships. These relationships include the complementary covenant partnership of love between the Heavenly Father and Son enacted in creation and in redemption, with Israel and with the church, Christ's Body. But most profoundly, same-sex sexual relations fail to represent the eternal unity and non-interchangeable differentiation of the Father and Son in their internal and eternal relationship of

holy love. We are gendered beings in order to have the potential to glorify the Triune Savior God through our right covenantal relationships with one another, and when expressed in and through sexual relations within the proper bounds of the special calling of marriage, to do so in the highest and most paradigmatic way. This is the spiritual meaning and significance of gender in its most profound form.

What's behind the commands?

Seen in this light, the various insights and commands regarding marriage and proper sexual relations given throughout Scripture and finally revealed in Christ, coalesce. Within this context of the divine purpose for being gendered beings it becomes perfectly coherent to see why, first of all, so many of the Biblical commands have to do with sexual behavior. The relationship between the sexes is a sacred trust with a good and glorious God-given purpose. It is to bear a unique witness to God's own internal and external love. The content of those commands (mostly in the negative, "thou shall not...") are designed to preserve that purpose, to prevent the denigration of that relationship to the point that it could no longer express God's kind of love, which is holy love, and be used to glorify God.

It is no wonder then that when a sexual relationship is intrinsic to a biblical illustration, the heterosexual marital relationship is the sole image used to speak of God's relation with his people throughout Scripture. Within this special and restricted form, we are offered the most positive, profound and comprehensive vision of how we may glorify the Triune God by means of our gender.¹⁷ It is within this context that we ought to interpret the commands to faithfulness and fidelity in marriage, the problem of divorce, the issue of sexual promiscuity and finally, yes, the prohibitions against same-sex sexual relations. None of the biblical commands are merely arbitrary rules. They back up God's good purposes for humanity and their right relationships with each other. But it is only in the light of those purposes that we can grasp the full meaning and significance of the commands.

¹⁷It should be noted that all biblical concern for improper mixing (of gender in same-sex activity, in bestiality or in cross-dressing) and all the laws that reinforce the differentiation of the sexes, are meant to maintain the proper independence and yet togetherness of the sexes. This might even be what is behind such prohibitions such as mixing flax and wool. The differentiations that God has built into creation are good and have been created for the purpose of giving God glory. The confusion of the various distinctions, especially sexual, can only signal a confusion of man with God, creation with Creator and Heavenly Father with Son. This means they ultimately misrepresent love itself, in its sexual expression (which again, is the only thing being questioned).

Can the Two Relations be Regarded as Comparable?

Within this comprehensive context we may now address our question regarding same-sex sexual relations. Are same-sex sexual relations and opposite-gendered sexual relations equal in fulfilling God's purpose for humanity to bear his image and thus glorify God?¹⁸ Do the two types of sexual relations equally demonstrate God's kind of holy love? Can they have the same moral and spiritual meaning or significance?¹⁹

The answer seems clear. They cannot be regarded as moral and spiritual equivalents. Same-sex sexual relations fail to exhibit the true nature of love when sexually expressed (its moral failure) and cannot bear witness through sexual relations to the nature or shape of God's love eternally within God's own Trinitarian life or externally in relationship to creation (its spiritual failure). It cannot mean or signify the same thing. So let's spell out in detail those ways they cannot be regarded as moral or spiritual equivalents.

A failure to image non-interchangeable differentiation

Based on what we've covered so far, it should now be clear that same-sex sexual relations cannot glorify God in the same way as do the sexual relations of a man and woman in marriage. Relations between persons of the same gender do not and cannot image *in their sexual attraction or in any sexual behavior*²⁰ the differentiation essential to the marital relations of a man and woman. The differentiation of God and humanity and the differentiation of the Heavenly Father

¹⁸What is in question here is whether, in a relationship between persons of the same gender, the element of sexual/erotic attraction and any genital/sexual behavior which might aim to fulfill or arouse such desires, can be regarded as fulfilling or violating the God-given purpose of being sexual/gendered beings. Relations between persons of the same gender that are not established or maintained in any part for the purpose of arousing or fulfilling sexual attraction or engaging in sexual/genital behavior (even if some of those feelings might be occasionally present but are neither acted upon nor are justified) are not in question. Non-erotic feelings and expression of affection between persons of the same gender are not being questioned here, even though there is a possibility that they might possibly be an occasion for the arousal and expression of erotic feelings and behavior.

¹⁹ When I speak of moral and spiritual meaning, I am not talking about the personal significance or the emotional value that individuals may psychologically experience or assign to their sexual interactions, especially in comparison to others. The moral meaning involves the quality or form of love enacted in the sexual relationship. The spiritual meaning indicates the transcendent reality to which the act points or bears witness to or glorifies. Do these two kinds of relationship exhibit the same moral and spiritual meaning and so fulfill the God-given design for gender *when expressed in sexual relations*? That is the question.

²⁰This is not to deny that there could be other dimensions of that same sex-relationship which might be a faithful reflection of God's love or that other nonsexual dimensions of non-marital relations between persons of the same or different sexes could not be truly loving. They may be equivalent in all these other ways. But this is not what is in question, either biblically or in the debates. What is being questioned is the sexual behavior within the relationship, not the total relationship. The question is whether or not the sexual dimension is being used faithfully and whether or not the gift of gender is itself being used in a way that glorifies God. *The rightness of other dimensions of the relationship does not override the wrong use of another dimension.*

and Son, cannot be represented in same-sex *sexual* relations as they are in heterosexual marital *sexual* relations. Same-sex sex acts, rather, bear witness to the gender sameness of the partners or at least to the irrelevance of the sexual difference of the partners and so cannot give proper glory to God or to the pattern of God's love. Sexual relations for which sexual differentiation is essential, cannot be compared to relations in which sexual differentiation is replaced with sexual sameness. In same-sex sexual relations, gender differentiation is irrelevant—morally and spiritually meaningless. However, the biblical revelation makes clear that God has given sexual differentiation highest relevance in that it is given to humanity to bear witness to the pattern of life-giving relations in the Triune God, between God and us in Christ, and between men and women in marital sexual union.

The denial of non-interchangeable difference sets up a new but false norm

I think we have to say that, in fact, same-sex sexual relations embody a false witness to the pattern of fellowship and communion we have with God and to the nature of the Triune love that we are to reflect in our human relations. It embodies the assertion that differentiation is meaningless. In denying the normative status of heterosexual sexual relations, same-sex sexual relations embody the assertion that the interchangeability of one for the other gender bears witness, if not more faithfully than just as faithfully, to the realities it was created to glorify. And in this case we end up with two contradictory and mutually exclusive norms (interchangeability over against non-interchangeability) both of which cannot be sustained. Thus the denial of the heterosexual norm must give way to the establishment of interchangeability as the true and superior norm.²¹ That is a compact summary. Let's now try to unpack it a little.

Gender differentiation becomes morally meaningless and spiritually purposeless

If we pose the question—Just what purpose does gender play in same-sex relations?—the answer is *none*. Gender differentiation between the two partners is irrelevant. So, gender differentiation, within such a relationship, can serve no spiritual purpose at all since it is simply done away with. That gives sharper focus to our initial query. *Can a sexual relationship in which gender has no moral and spiritual significance be regarded as morally and spiritually identical to one in which gender difference is essential to the relationship and to its moral and spiritual significance? Clearly not.* The claim that same-sex sexual acts are identical in meaning to heterosexual acts has

²¹ When one norm is de-normed, even if only by purporting to establish an alternative normative behavior, the alternative *must* become the new norm if it upholds a contradictory view. In such cases one has to give way to the other; they can't both be adhered to equally. Establishing a competing norm that declares the rival norm insignificant *constitutes the demotion of the rival as a norm at all*. What is normative can't be regarded as insignificant and meaningless. The demoted norm must be regarded as no more than a narrower exception to the (new) rule. If gender is irrelevant to marriage, then those who regard it as morally or spiritually significant must simply be regarded as holding on to a narrower, arbitrary and personal preference. They are holding on to a myth, a fiction and a false value. The debate is about whether gender is or is not meaningful or morally significant for sexual relations and marriage. They both cannot have the same normative status. They are incommensurate. A society might be able to tolerate both, but one or the other will have the upper hand. One will be at an advantage and the other at a disadvantage. The hope that these two views of marriage can be held equally is a fiction and deception.

to overlook the fact that in them gender differentiation has no moral or spiritual meaning. The genders are interchangeable. A male may substitute for a female or vice versa without any consequence as to the moral and spiritual status of the sexual relationship. The claim of equality can be sustained only by assuming and asserting that there is no proper or improper use of gender. Gender, in this case, is regarded as irrelevant for discerning the moral status of the sexual relationship and the nature of love. Gender in such sexual relations is also assumed to be irrelevant to bearing witness to God and God's purposes for humanity being created with two genders. There is no need for us, then, in our sexual relationships to image differentiation and non-interchangeability of God and humanity.²² That is, gender differentiation in sexual relations has no spiritual purpose or meaning either.

Dissolving the significance of non-interchangeable difference in every relationship of covenant love

In themselves, to the degree that same-sex *sexual relations* refer at all beyond themselves (that is, glorify by imaging something other than themselves as they are meant to do), they communicate/image that the difference between the Father and the Son, the difference between God and Creation, the difference between the two natures of Christ and the differences between members of the Body of Christ and between the Head and the Body of Christ are irrelevant and meaningless. The differences aren't at all essential to the nature and pattern of love expressed in all these relationships. By asserting an equivalency with heterosexual sexual relations they convey that gender interchangeability rather than gender-differentiated non-interchangeability is essentially the norm. Regarding such a pattern as paradigmatic would lead us to think that God the Father and God the Son are interchangeable and not differentiated, that God and creation are interchangeable and not differentiated, that the divine and human natures in Christ are interchangeable and not differentiated, that the Head and Body of Christ are interchangeable and not differentiated, that the members of the Body of Christ are interchangeable with and not differentiated from each other since any reason to require that the relations must be between opposite sexes has been dismissed. The particular gender of the partners *relative to each other* has no relevance for discerning whether the relationship is right, is loving or can signify the transcendent reality to which it ought to point or image. In this sense, then, the relative genders of the persons involved in same-sex relations, with regard to its meaning and significance, are regarded as interchangeable. The gender of the other becomes simply a matter of personal preference, not a criterion of right, loving relationship or of transcendent spiritual meaning or significance. Or we could say the meaning and significance of the relative gender of the persons no longer refers to anything beyond the individuals involved but rather has been reduced to "what it means and signifies to me." In other words, gender in sexual relations has no purpose to

²² Of course there can be a happy inconsistency in which those who justify same-sex relations affirm that we never should confuse God with humanity or the Father with the Son. But the point would be that they would then rightly affirm in their theology what their behavior falsely bears witness to. This is similar to certain forms of Gnostic dualism, where the actions done in the body are regarded as irrelevant to spiritual truth. So the apostle Paul has to counter those who engage in prostitution yet who claim to be one with Christ (1 Corinthians 6:16). His rejoinder is that what is done in the body damages the spiritual reality of who they are in Christ. Body and spirit cannot be separated, even if distinguished. What we do with our bodies is to correspond to the spiritual realities we affirm.

image anything other than itself. Such a position is of course self-justifying and so requires in itself no further justification from God or anyone else.

The dangers of denying the significance of gender differentiation in sexual behavior

I think there is even further fallout for how we regard our human relations if gender is morally and spiritually meaningless and interchangeability becomes a rival norm. Without the moral and spiritual significance of differentiated gender, the sexual act is reduced to a physiological act. The sex organs are being used but with no reference to their gender differentiation. Since no moral spiritual meaning is assigned to gender differentiation itself in the act, the behavior between two of the same gender, although involving the sex organs, carries within it no sexual/gendered meaning. Indeed it cannot, because gender can be meaningful only in relation to its polar opposite. If there were not two opposite sexes in the first place, if all humanity had the same "gender," we wouldn't speak of sex or gender; we couldn't even conceive of it. Interactions involving what we now identify as sex organs would not be called sexual activity at all. Strictly speaking same-sex sexual behavior de-sexualizes the act. The sex act is, strictly speaking, reduced to a pleasure act. Yes, with another person, but with no regard for the otherness of their gender. The person may be other, but the gender is not.

Furthermore, if gender differentiation has a personal moral/spiritual meaning, then to disregard the spiritual meaning of the gender of the other in relation to one's own gender is to depersonalize the other and one's self. It is to reduce a spiritually significant aspect of personhood to an accident of physiology. Same-sex relations then de-sexualize and depersonalize the partners to a significant degree by regarding their gender differentiation/otherness as morally and spiritual irrelevant to the sex act itself.²³ Without reference to the moral and spiritual significance of gender differentiation in sexual relations, the gender of the other in relation to one's own is reduced to merely a matter of personal preference.²⁴ The act is referred to as sexual

²³It could be argued that such relationship is at least better than autoeroticism. I would have to agree. Same-sex relations at least involve another person and giving another intimate physical pleasure. However, this observation does not render same-sex relations any more faithful than we have suggested. It simply demonstrates that one could fall even farther away from God's ultimate purposes for our being gendered beings into autoeroticism.

²⁴It could be argued that care, concern, warmth, support, understanding, closeness and love characterize many, even most, same-sex relations. I would concede that point. However, the larger point is that although closeness and love may be present, they are operative outside of and independent of the sexual dimension of the relationship. They don't in the least ameliorate the moral/spiritual meaningfulness of any behavior involving the sex organs or the erotic feelings which desire such involvement. Same-sex friendships which do not involve sexual relations, uphold all these characteristics and are not at all problematic. The issue under discussion is the meaning and significance of sexual relations in same-sex relationships. Genuine friendship between those of the same sex would indeed display a proper differentiation and non-interchangeability in all relevant aspects. However, when a sexual element is brought into a perfectly good and meaningful friendship, an aspect of a different character is introduced. The differentiation or otherness of gender is then left out of the sexual interaction, even if all the other kinds of difference are largely left intact. The presence of love in a relationship does not justify every kind of interaction, especially acts which involve a significant aspect of that

only because the organs used are called sex organs. The act itself, however, would be more accurately described from within the relationship as a-sexual or non-gendered.

Of course if the gender of another is involved in an act, but is regarded as morally/spiritually irrelevant, this means that moral considerations don't apply to that aspect of the relationship. In same-sex relations the relative genders of the persons involved in the sexual behavior has no moral value, they are at best a-moral. Thus, in contrast to heterosexual sexual acts where the relative moral, spiritual, and personal dimensions of gender are upheld, same-sex sexual relations have been demoralized and depersonalized. The two forms of relationship cannot be compared or equated as they display vastly different understanding of the nature, value and purpose of why we are gendered beings.

An essential aspect of complementarity is absent

In terms of partnership within covenant or marital love, same-sex union cannot represent the identical complementarity. In a same-sex union, the gender/sexuality of each one contributes nothing different to the other partner, nor to their joint tasks, than what the other brings himself/herself. In terms of gender, the partners need nothing from the other that they do not have themselves. They both bring the same gender orientation and so, at that point, there is no difference. This relation cannot be considered an equal substitute for a partnership involving two different genders. Whatever otherness they offer, and there inevitably will be some, that otherness cannot include one of gender. The complementary nature of gender will play no part in their covenant love or in their covenant service.²⁵

Non-sexual relations of men and women are misconstrued and subject to disorder

Indeed, if humanity is a co-humanity, constituted as male and female, then discerning right and loving masculinity can be found only by working it out in right relationship with femininity, and vice versa. The meaning of gender and its proper expression can only be known in light of its opposite. Men and women, to become truly who they are as men and women, must discover the form of right relationship one with another. The apostle Paul seems to have had this in mind when he wrote of the intrinsic interdependence of men and women.²⁶ There is a mutual interdependence between men and women. This particular structure of humanity bears witness to the deeper fact that humanity as a whole cannot find its true identity except in rightly reconciled relationship with God, a relationship which, due to non-interchangeability, only God can provide. Humanity cannot be itself by itself. It requires communion with Another.

person's personhood, such as their gender, but which is disregarded as personally, morally or spiritual meaningful or significant.

²⁵ This is extremely ironic when there is now wide agreement, among liberals and conservatives, that women's voices need to be brought in to complement men's ways of perceiving, thinking, reacting and doing things, whether in public or private matters, even if understood hierarchically. Same-sex relations paradigmatically deny any significant need for the complementary contributions of both genders.

²⁶ "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God" (1Corinthians 11:11-12).

The problem of aloneness is not addressed at its deepest level, true fellowship undermined

Thus, it would follow, as we find in the Genesis account, that when one remains with one's own kind the problem of aloneness remains. Adam's aloneness could only be dealt with fully through covenant communion with woman. Such an aloneness is resolved only when one is with one who is truly other. The unity of others who are different is at the heart of community. However, the same-sex relation, if regarded as an equivalent, indicates that aloneness can just as well be resolved by relationship with one's own kind. It indicates that there is no real need of one gender by the other. A same-sex union bears (false) witness that each gender is sufficient unto itself.²⁷

Interdependence of men and women obscured, partnership undermined, reconciliation thwarted

Such an orientation, then, cannot bear witness to the fact that humanity cannot fulfill itself by itself, but must have communion with its polar opposite, God. Same-sex relation, because it gives no spiritual value to the other gender in its sexual dimension, betrays the God-given purpose for being gendered beings. They cannot bear witness either to the dependence of humanity upon God nor to the interdependence of man and woman.²⁸ It certainly cannot bear witness to God's intention to reconcile men and women, which the apostle Paul announced.²⁹ It rather suggests that such reconciliation is unnecessary and perhaps might be impossible to achieve.

How the interdependence of men and women affects their working together in creation can only be surmised, although there is some research on this area. We can assume that, even in such seemingly gender-neutral areas, men and women each have something unique to offer in and through their right relationship. This should rule out any strict competition between the sexes that regards the other as a threat or hopes to prove some kind of superiority over the other. Rather, their service is to be a cooperative one. However, where the masculine and feminine are

²⁷ By aloneness, I don't primarily mean the psychological experience of feeling lonely and I don't think this is what is meant in Genesis 2. The aloneness referenced there is to a much more fundamental dimension of human existence which lacks an essential togetherness that involves an enriching, enlargement of the self, the inclusion of the truly other that can generate a unique unity that would not be the same without the difference.

²⁸ Arguments that promote same-sex relations as equivalent to heterosexual relations should not be regarded as an ally for moderate feminists or for those concerned about racism. They represent the claim that one only needs one's own kind. Fundamentally, men only need men, women only need women. Thus any call for reconciliation, cooperation or a change of one's attitudes about the other are terminally undermined. Same-sex relations stand for the idolization of one's own gender. To apply this analogously to race would mean that each race itself is fully self-sufficient. This is tantamount to idolizing race and can provide no foundation for a call to racial reconciliation or cooperation. Rather such logic promotes racism. Rather than bearing witness to the reconciliation of men and women in Jesus Christ, same-sex relations announce the irrelevance and non-necessity and impossibility of any true reconciliation. Indeed the promotion and justification of same-sex unions may be justly regarded as justifying the betrayal of the opposite gender and rationalizing a defection to one's own gender at its most fundamental level. Such a logic constitutes a denial of the logic of the gospel of reconciliation.

²⁹ Galatians 3:28.

regarded as self-sufficient, the relations between the sexes can only devolve to a competition or perhaps, simply, a stand-off, rather than productive complementary partnership.

Such relationships cannot bear witness to the true partnership of men and women as Adam and Eve were intended to in their original state. They cannot bear witness to mankind's partnership with God in the care of the creation. Rather, they image either an autonomy of God and humanity, so that a given responsibility is entirely one or the other's, or that there is essentially a competition between God and humankind for control of the creation. An asymmetrical, complementary partnership is ruled out from the start.

The exclusion of procreative fruitfulness

Finally, the justification of same-sex unions as equivalent cannot bear witness to the fruitfulness that can only come from the relation of woman with man. The same-sex union is sterile in terms of procreation. It cannot bear witness to God's overabundant and creative relationship to creation. It cannot represent the outgoing and life-giving love of God reaching out to that which is utterly different from himself and giving it what it cannot give to itself. It can only represent a knowingly deliberate fruitless love that cannot itself give life to another. The sexual dimension of such relationships represents futility and sterility, not creativity and fruitfulness. Such a sexual relationship cannot fulfill the God-given purposes of humanity as a whole to image the God of Creation and Life, both biological and spiritual.³⁰

The counter-argument to procreation as essential to God's purposes for sexual relations

Some want to argue against the principle of fruitfulness by contending that childless opposite-sex couples would then also not be legitimate. However, this implication is both logically and theologically false. Theologically, the biblical viewpoint undeniably affirms that fruitfulness is indeed essential to God's purpose for marriage. There is no getting around this. It stands as a norm with a purpose. *However, such a purpose and norm is never called into question in the case of barren couples.* Rather, throughout the biblical revelation that "barrenness" is regarded as a lamentable condition that prevents couples from participating fully in God's purpose for sexual relations in marriage. While this condition is not regarded as the full equivalent to fruitful marriages, neither is a logical or theological inference *ever* made that such a marriage should be

³⁰It could be argued that gays and lesbians want to share their love, and so, many want to adopt children and should be allowed to do so. Again, it is good that such persons desire to share life with others. However, such adoptions cannot be used to justify the deliberate, knowing choice of a fruitless sexual union. When approached as a justification, adoption can amount to a cover-up and a delusion. It can represent an attempt to portray same-gender relations as equally productive of human life. While it certainly can be nurturing, it cannot itself be procreative. The nurture can be true only *ex post facto*, after the fact of bi-gendered procreation. And the nurture, while still positive, will be qualitatively different from that experienced in opposite-gendered parenting. The adopted child would be living in the midst of great ambiguity, especially if such an arrangement was justified as an equivalent. It would appear that two of the same gender were sufficient in every way for being parents. However, this is not the truth if the history of an individual is traced back to his/her fundamental origin. Thus same-sex parenting, *when presented as an equivalent alternative*, obscures the total truth rather than bears witness to the truth. It takes a man and a woman to give new life, even if that life is subsequently parented by others.

regarded as sinful or null and void. Childlessness never is used to call into question God's overall purpose for marriage. That purpose stands and that's why it's lamented in biblical revelation and often by involuntarily childless couples as well.

However, the false logic that claims procreation is irrelevant to evaluating the moral, spiritual status of same-sex sexual relations, simply because biblical revelation and the church do not condemn childless couples, does exactly this. It asserts that fruitfulness is irrelevant to the meaning and purpose of sexual relations in marriage.³¹ It makes the claim that because childless marriage is not regarded as illegitimate, therefore a same-sex couple (that has no possibility of bearing their own children through sexual relations) has the same status as a heterosexual couple that *does* bear children as a result of their sexual relations. In the biblical view, not even childless heterosexual couples are regarded as equivalent, much less childless same sex couples.

Why can childless heterosexual couples still be regarded as legitimate? Because they can still contribute in a significant way to God's purposes for sexual differentiation, especially when they still affirm that their childless condition is less than ideal. Since the two partners remain sexually differentiated, otherness is still represented, aloneness would still be answered and a complementary partnership towards others, including extended family and creation (not to mention the possibility of offering complementary parenting through adoption) could still be exercised. None of these elements of heterosexual marriage would be represented in same-sex couples. *What is less than ideal for childless heterosexual couples is not the gendered form of the relationship, but the biological health of the reproductive system that prevents procreation.* The heterosexual couple still represents, in principle, the truth and meaning of sexual procreation even if in their particular case it does not eventuate in the production of children. The meaning and significance of sexual fruitfulness is upheld even if it is not fully manifested in a particular case of childlessness. Same-sex sexual relations, when considered an equivalent, embody the denial of the principle and meaning of fruitfulness. But clearly the denial over and against the affirmation of the principle and significance of fruitfulness of sexual relations cannot be regarded as identical. The *de facto* childlessness of a particular couple in no way sets up a rival norm, or *de jure* principle, as would the claim of equivalence of childless same-sex couples to childless heterosexual couples.

³¹ The logical form of the argument goes like this:

If it is God's purpose for sexual relations (in marriage) to be fruitful

Then God and his people will regard those marriages which are fruitful as legitimate marriages.

So, since God and his people do not regard the marriages of childless couples as illegitimate

Then it must not be God's purpose for marriage to be fruitful

Therefore procreation is irrelevant to whether or not sexual relations (in marriage) is legitimate in God's view.

While this form of argument, (denying the consequent, or *modus tollens*) *might* be true in certain cases, it is *never* necessarily true. Arguing that it is necessarily true constitutes a logical fallacy.

The counter argument would stand only if procreation were the *only* purpose for our being gendered beings and if in principle childlessness were considered identical in meaning to bearing children, that is, bore identical witness to the form of God's love in as full a way as does having children. In order to maintain the claim to equivalence, it must assert that fruitfulness is irrelevant to and has no bearing on the meaning and significance of sexual relations. It must assert this disjunction even though there is no actual possibility of practically disjoining the fact of biological reproduction from the participation of two different genders.³² The counter argument can only serve as a purely conceptual affirmation without any basis in reality.

Summary as to why there cannot be moral and spiritual equivalence

Thus, on numerous essential counts, same-sex unions cannot be regarded as the spiritual and moral equivalent of the sexual/marital union between a man and a woman. They cannot fulfill God's purposes for us to use our gender to bear witness to the unity and difference, the covenant partnership, the true nature of fellowship in service, or the life-giving fruitfulness of right relationship. They cannot bear faithful witness to the relationship between God and humanity in Christ or between the heavenly Father and the Son. In fact, the justification of same-sex union as an equivalent constitutes an abandonment of that purpose, bearing witness to its opposite: signaling in a paradigmatic (normative) way rather than there is no need for a non-interchangeable opposite either in the realm of human relations or in relationship of humankind with God or within the Godhead.

This is a stark and even perhaps shocking conclusion regarding the true nature of what same-sex sexual unions image. I think so myself. But it is a conclusion which is consonant with the whole testimony of God's purposes for our being gendered beings and the commandments which consistently reinforce that divinely given purpose.

Of course it could be denied that sexual relations are meant to serve as a paradigm for any other relations—that is not their purpose at all. This more general claim would not, however, serve to strengthen an argument for equivalence but would only widen the gap. For relationships that have such a paradigmatic imaging purpose would not be equivalent to ones that do not. Furthermore, such a view has cut itself off from the biblical revelation that indicates that gender in sexual relations among human beings does have an imaging/paradigmatic purpose. Such a denial admits up front that biblical authority is irrelevant in this case and affirms that sexual relations have a different purpose from what the biblical revelation indicates. This denial amounts to a bald assertion of moral and spiritual non-equivalence and admits to drawing from a

³² Yes, this raises yet another question of whether heterosexual couples who voluntarily and deliberately choose not to have children have a proper regard for the meaning of sexual relations and marriage. While an important question, it does not bear on the issue of the equivalence of same-sex sexual relations. Only a false chain of logical or theological inferences could attempt to make it bear upon our question, as we saw in the arguments used to object to procreation as intrinsic to the meaning of sexual relations within marriage. Voluntarily childless couples may have a faulty view of the meaning and significance of procreation, but the form of their sexual relationships does not deny in principle the affirmation nor necessarily establish a contradictory norm. Their views *may be* questionable, but that does not put into question the embodied principle upheld by their heterosexual relationship.

source other than biblical revelation for understanding its meaning and purpose, if any at all. In essence, such an argument has placed itself outside the sphere of Christian faith and revelational authority. Such a denial is, of course, then self-justifying. It bears witness to itself and need not refer to any reality or purpose beyond itself. Those who hold such a position will not, of course, be persuaded by any of these arguments. But that should be expected. These reflections assume that biblical revelation teaches us something we could not definitively know without it and that the purpose and meaning of our lives is to refer us to realities outside ourselves and even transcendent to ourselves. In other words, such assumptions of meaning and purpose are grounded even more fundamentally in roots of the Christian faith itself. Within that sphere, faith seeks understanding of the biblical revelation that both exemplifies and gives rise to Christian faith in the first place. These reflections will only exhibit plausibility to those who share the Christian faith that biblical revelation itself generates.³³ To what degree they are actually illuminating and persuasive, not to say, clear, I leave up to others who share Christian faith to discern.

Concluding Words

Where do we go from here? It seems to me that, given the spiritual/moral purpose for our being gendered beings, much is at stake for all parties concerned if we fail to use our sexuality properly and especially if we attempt to justify same-sex sexual relations as having equal status to heterosexual marriage. Granting equivalence can only contribute not only to confusion on the human plane but proclaims a false witness, which distorts any true testimony as to the character of God's covenantal faithfulness, God's relationship with humanity and the shape of Holy Love within the Triune relations themselves. Considered in itself as an embodied paradigmatic act, sexual relations that deny the moral and spiritual meaning of gender differentiation imaged in heterosexual marriage will at least contribute to spiritual confusion and inconsistency, if not an outright denial of the true quality of love.

This means that rather than being regarded as just another minor disagreement in the Church, we ought to acknowledge that the discernment of the truth in this issue is crucial. What is at stake is the loss of the essential purpose for and value of our being gendered beings at the highest and most profound level. The result of this loss will be a significant degree of depersonalization, dehumanization and demoralization of life. The promotion of such relations as an equivalent substitute for heterosexual marriage should not be easily assented to for the sake of the witness of the Church and for the sake of those individuals who may be deceived and harmed by entering into such relationships. The agenda to equate the two forms of sexual relationship should be resisted for the sake of those who are looking for compassionate understanding, support and encouragement to fight the fight of faith in just this particular arena. But even more ultimate than these things, we should resist the promotion of such same-sex relations, when dogmatically justified as equally normative, because they intrinsically obscure the glory of the unique quality of the covenant love of God in Christ—a love that extends to us mere human creatures (fallen

³³ There are, of course, arguments that defend the unique meaning and significance of heterosexual marriage that same-sex unions cannot exemplify. These are strictly moral and not spiritual or theological arguments and are not based on any particular religion. The best example of this can be found in the article from the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* (Vol. 34), "What is Marriage?" by Sherif Girgis, Robert P. George, and Ryan T. Anderson. It can be accessed at: < <http://www.harvard-jlpp.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/GeorgeFinal.pdf> >

ones at that), who cannot create or redeem ourselves but rely, body and soul, upon God's triumphant, gracious faithfulness.

These conclusions do not mean that we may violate biblical commands regarding our approach to sinners (which includes all of us) who must be respected and treated with kindness and patience. We must listen deeply so as to discern each one's personal situation and the particular stance they take on the moral and spiritual status of same-sex relations and attraction. They may not believe nor have any interest in promoting such relations as an equal substitute for biblical marriage. We must offer compassion and comfort, forgiveness and grace to all with the patience of Job and Jesus. And that should never come to an end. Yet, that same love will guide us to speak the truth in love to those who do want to justify and promote such relationships in the Church as a legitimate alternative to marriage. And we ought to do this first for the sake of rightly representing Jesus Christ himself and the true nature of his covenant faithfulness to us. Secondly, we ought to do this for the sake of the good and right use of our gender expressed in sexual relations that bear witness to God's kind of covenant love. Any confrontation with the truth must be done with that same kind of love.

But even more important, speaking such truth in love will guide us in the midst of our ministering with Christ to anyone and everyone. It will especially give light and hope to those who are dealing with unwanted same-sex attraction, who find their identity first and foremost in their relationship to Christ and not in their sexual orientation or behavior. It will provide encouragement to those who are looking for support and companionship on their road of discipleship, an arduous and costly road that all Christians walk, not of self-justification but of dying to a false self in order to receive true life as a gift of grace coming from beyond ourselves, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I trust that these theological reflections can contribute to an increase of compassion in the Church towards all those who need a place to belong, who are looking for renewal through repentance and faith, who seek healing and direction for pursuing healthy relationships with God and with each other. These reflections are offered in the hope that we all, whether dealing with same-sex issues or not, might joyfully and thankfully receive the gift of gender from God and discover more and more profoundly how we might live in all our relationships, in every dimension, to the glory of our Triune God.