

Rightly Handling the Word of Truth: Scripture, Canon, and Creed

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“The Ethics of Sex, Marriage, and the Family”

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Personal Remarks

When Carl Braaten emailed me to participate in this conference, he likely knew Charleston would conjure up memories of past events and make the invitation all the more enticing. The Anglican Communion Institute hosted regular January conferences in Charleston for about ten years, beginning in 1996. We started a three-book series on the Nicene Creed, The Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer, with contributions by Carl, Robert Jenson, and David Yeago—from the Lutheran Tribe—as well as Methodist, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Orthodox and Free Church authors.¹ “The Future for a New Ecumenism” was one book’s optimistic subtitle. But church politics overtook us, and looking back it seems like a slow-moving train wreck was only beginning, leaving us with the break-up and carnage all of us in our various Christian tribes are now surveying. I started my teaching career 30 years ago as the first non-Lutheran to teach at the seminary in Philadelphia, and ate a frequent lunch at 2900 Queen Lane at the then Fortress Press. So your world and my own denominated world have intersected for many years. Though most of my PhD students at Toronto now come from the Missouri Synod Lutheran branch, I have never felt far from the wider Lutheran universe, here and in Germany, which under the hand of God is now not what you or I might have expected 30 years ago.

I. General Challenges

I want to mention a couple of challenges before I begin. They inform what I will say and guide the selection of what I choose to focus on. I recall speaking on homosexuality at Brite Divinity School in the late nineties and vowing never to do another conference on the topic, whose format featured a “diversity of viewponts.” Something had obviously broken in our appeal to scripture that would not be resolved by everyone trying a bit harder or with more charity.²

¹ C. Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); Carl E. Braaten and C. Seitz, eds., *“I am the Lord Your God”: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

² The conference papers were published as David Balch, ed., *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

Secondly, the topic as sketched out seems to require the services of a paid-up Ethicist and I am a biblical scholar. So I am not going to wander too far from my own area of training. But I will try to embrace the challenge in this specific way. I will take Ethics to mean the way the biblical teaching from Genesis to Revelation takes practical form in our world of living the Gospel faith. Unavoidably, I believe that takes us straight to the marriage rites of the church. I know these differ amongst our Christian tribes, but they have had far more in common in their present various guises than ones that will soon be upon us. We may disagree about whether Christian marriage is a sacrament and what that means, but we can all agree that standing before God and making solemn vows and receiving the church's blessing constitutes an ethical act. Something is being agreed to, before God. And most importantly, what warrants the blessing of God Almighty is being set forth, heard by all, witnessed to and affirmed on those terms and not others.

The marriage rite in the Episcopal BCP will guide my ethical reflections because that is the tradition I am familiar with. I would be surprised if the basic warrants and contours, biblically rooted and biblically norming, were not familiar to you on similar terms.³ An important point is thereby registered. Mine will not be an examination of the crucial character of this or that marriage rite, as somehow more decisive than the scriptural landscape that gives rise to them. Every marriage rite assumes as much as it expresses explicitly, through its specific language and form. The relationship, then, between the whole scriptural landscape and what it expresses on this subject and what the rites functioning in the church foreground is a symbiotic one. A good rite follows what has been traditionally called the rule of faith, and the rule of faith is a faithful, proportional, comprehensive coming-to-boil of what scripture as a whole commends, under the lordship of Jesus Christ, who is its everlasting Word. Christian Ethics points to that place where scripture, in accordance with the rule of faith, comes into life and practice. This means when Christians make marriage vows in a rite of the church an ethical form of life is being embraced by us, bigger than us, and worthy of being bigger because warranted by God in creation, in Christ, and in his church from all eternity.

I am prepared to speak on this topic yet again because we now face a particular challenge in culture and in the church in understanding Christian marriage and family. The word 'marriage' is likely to be/is being taken over by culture and altered in respect of the goods formerly implied thereby. This won't be the first time language of the church has been bent to new purpose, and it won't be the last. But that gives the church the responsibility to be clear about what it means by the word 'marriage' when it finds its place within the ethical decision making inherent in a solemn rite, with scripture readings, solemn charges, vows, prayers, and blessing. It is to this

³ See my comments on "tacit knowledge" and the Book of Common Prayers in *The Character of Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 173-90.

‘marriage’ that I will be speaking, and not to newer efforts to commandeer the word and alter the ‘estate’ to which we have been called by scripture through the rites of the church’s ruled life.

Two final comments. Anticipating my conclusion, I believe it is clear that churches will alter marriage rites consistent with their altered understanding. They will create what they call gender-neutral rites, or they will seek to make a progressive new rite range alongside a former one, or they will eliminate a former one altogether and aggressively so; all three options are on the table.

In the light of this it is important to keep in mind and heart that what they cannot succeed in doing is erasing from the church’s life and time the logic and ethical contours of a former one I will be working with today. They will believe they will be doing that, but in point of fact, ethically speaking, they cannot. Rather, what they will succeed in doing is not so much changing a rite, but changing the nature of the church into a very different one, one which will no longer be ruled and normed on these ritual terms and not by others. In spite of all that, the rites we have traditionally used and the scriptural and dominical warrants they presuppose will not vanish from the earth. Those who wish to enter into this traditional marriage estate, and understand it as the arena in which God’s blessing is made possible in Christ, by action of the Holy Spirit, will continue do so and will thereby bear witness to a specific set of scriptural convictions. One may change a word. One may create a new self-understanding and call it church. One cannot vaporize an understanding of marriage whose sacred character will outlive semantic changes.

Second. In so much of the rhetoric of the modern and post-modern world we find the appeal to something called identity. Not a verbal but a nominal state of affairs, called “being Gay,” or “LGBTi.” Is this state of affairs socially constructed and so generated by specific cultural conditions, and if so, is it a desirable outcome or one that is corrigible of change, given other possible constructive forces? I believe this topic represents the coal-face of our modern and postmodern evaluation, and it is a deeply ethical question we are likely too in-the-middle-of-things for time in God’s hand to have rendered a sufficiently clear verdict. But there is also a deeply biblical question about what the term “identity” might mean for those of us Paul describes as having died and been buried in Christ, whose present identity, as men and as women, is hid with him.

Do we speak far too confidently than God would allow us, in Christ, of any identity, as finally determinative of who we are in him? Perhaps the most Christian answer to the question of identity is permanently to confess that we do not fully know who we are, because day by day, as men and women, we are being made new creations in him, if indeed we are allowing his life to be the measure of who we are becoming. An entire lecture could be dedicated to this very

important ethical question.⁴ I have said enough to indicate my own deep skepticism about whether there is something like a clear ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ identity, much less one that could be determinative in any major way for what it means to be a Christian.

II. The Character of the Biblical Witness and Christian Marriage

Now to the heart of the present challenge, which I believe is a familiar one in the ancient church as well.

Every opponent of Christianity—real or perceived—was an ardent scripture reader. We know this clearly from reading the works of the early church fathers. There we see steady and sustained engagement with rival views of scripture and interpretation, as they struggle to defend the church’s faith and practice on the basis of the scriptures. It was said one time, ‘there is no such thing as an impious heretic.’ It could equally be said, ‘there was no false or misleading account of Christian faith that did not take the form of an argument from scripture.’ And how scripture delivers its proper sense.

Three examples.

1. The gnostics liked scripture because it expressed experiences of ascent and higher knowledge they judged to be rather weak examples of their own. Indeed for the Gnostics, after the bible things got better in their own land of religious experience. The bible shows us something experientially and points to it out beyond its own limited range. Beyond that, it is dispensable. It is a metaphor pool. A set of spiritual suggestions. Not a source but a resource.⁵

⁴ See the perceptive evaluation of Oliver O’Donovan, in *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology* (Vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) and *The Church in Crisis: Homosexuality and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008).

⁵ Paul’s reference to an ascent to heavenly perspective was evocative for them. “When, however, they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. For [they allege] that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but *vivâ voce*: wherefore also Paul declared, “But we speak wisdom among those that are perfect, but not the wisdom of this world.” And this wisdom each one of them alleges to be the fiction of his own inventing, forsooth; so that, according to their idea, the truth properly resides at one time in Valentinus, at another in Marcion, at another in Cerinthus, then afterwards in Basilides, or has even been indifferently in any other opponent, who could speak nothing pertaining to salvation. For every one of these men, being altogether of a perverse disposition, depraving the system of truth, is not ashamed to preach himself” (Ireneaus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter 2).

2. Marcion and his followers liked the Bible because it had some books that were decidedly and obviously better than others. Once one cleared out the undergrowth, the pure gospel could be found in Galatians and Luke (shorn of infancy narratives and references to Moses and the Prophets in Luke 24). On this account, not all of scripture was usable or *intended to be usable*. Once one identified what kind of Jesus Jesus was, and what kind of God he bespoke, the rest could be dispensed with. This economical, stripped-down Jesus was in many ways easier to package and sell. Marcion we know had quite a following. In sum, for them the Bible is correct but just in selected parts and only after extensive pruning.⁶

3. Arius liked scripture because read properly it confirmed the most accurate way to describe a high Christ and an even higher godhead, thus preserving the oneness and transcendence of the God to which scripture otherwise referred. “He created me the first of his ways with the world” was a critical assertion from Proverbs 8:22 and believe it or not, it formed the main arena of exegetical debate over creedal language, as it would take form at Nicaea, “God from God, light from light..of one substance with the Father.” No, Arius said, that is not what scripture said, either at Proverbs 8 or elsewhere. Arius was a literalist who did not like scripture to be read as a complex totality, its sum greater than its parts. It is instead a book of discrete parts to be read as literally and discretely as possible.⁷ The roots of this view likely go back to the School of Antioch.⁸

If we are going to reflect on a theme like “The Ethics of Sex, Marriage and Family,” and presume to be doing so on the basis of the canon of scripture, we must be prepared to accept a cardinal reality. To speak of Christian Ethics is to speak of scripture in action, in the lived life of Christian formation and catechesis. Increasingly, very few progressives dismiss the scriptural record on sex, marriage and family. Some of course still do. They are bold to proclaim that the

⁶ “But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying that they themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth. For [they maintain] that the apostles intermingled the things of the law with the words of the Saviour; and that not the apostles alone, but even the Lord Himself, spoke as at one time from the Demiurge, at another from the intermediate place, and yet again from the Pleroma, but that they themselves, indubitably, unsulliedly, and purely, have knowledge of the hidden mystery: this is, indeed, to blaspheme their Creator after a most impudent manner! It comes to this, therefore, that these men do now consent neither to Scripture nor to tradition” (Irenaeus, III.2).

⁷ What David Yeago has here referred to the ‘pea-shucking’ model of interpretation.

⁸ See the very illuminating essay of C.F. Burney, “Christ as the ARXH of Creation (Prov. viii 22, Col. i 15–18, Rev. iii 14),” *JTS* 27 (1926): 160–77.

biblical witness is not just wrong in its parts (Genesis 1-3 as ancient Hebrew musing, Paul as wrong or speaking about something else, Jesus as all loving and disinterested in a modern phenomenon like gayness, which exists in a timeframe the bible does not nor could ever be expected to comprehend). The Bible is wrong, outdated, or just not addressing the matter of the challenge of new understandings of sex and human thriving, altogether. If it gets things right, it does so accidentally or inferentially, like the proverbial blind hog finding an acorn.

I mention this right up front because, as with the early church, what we now see is something else: a heavy assault *mounted from within Christian circles themselves* on prior understandings of the estate of marriage and its goods. Not from cultural despisers or secularists, but from those who purport to argue that their new understanding is indeed scriptural after all. Many secular and religious proponents of same-sexuality had concluded earlier that marriage was a patriarchal invention that no card-carrying proponent of sexual liberation—gay or straight—ought to go near. Inside Christian circles, this has changed.

So alongside those dubious about scripture having anything to say, accidentally or properly, are those who argue that their new understanding of sexuality is somehow biblical after all. In this sense, the debate over marriage, sex and family is one in which both sides, or several sides, all appeal to scripture. That is, not unlike the early church examples just cited. So we must ask: What account of scripture is it that has been brought to bear on our present and older understandings of sex, marriage, and family. Because of its scale, depth, and complex two-testament character, Scripture is infinitely capable of producing multiple interpretations. Irenaeus used the image of a mosaic. One receives a gift of scripture with all its myriad pieces, and the goal of interpretation is to see the face of the king, Jesus Christ, when all the pieces are properly and proportionally assembled. But equally, one could toss out pieces that do not seem to fit what one is looking for. Or one could assemble them and produce a fox, or a mirror of one's own self: our needs and rights and our individual paths to thriving. Gregory spoke of scripture as a river in which infants could wade and elephants swim, at one and the same time. But he could equally have said, elephants drown and infants plumb false depths.

The church fathers appealed to a rule of faith when it came to proper interpretation of scripture. Much of the rule wanted to clarify that the scriptures of Israel, over their total warp and woof, spoke of Christ.⁹ He was the word to patriarch, lawgiver, prophet, the word that brought a good creation into being, one with the father. “In the beginning (*arche*) was the word” rhyming with “in beginning—in *arche*, in Christ—God created the heavens and earth.” John 1 and Colossians 1 were telling us what the referents of the Old Testament truly were in the light of the

⁹ See “The Rule of Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Character of Christian Scripture,” in *Character*, 191-203.

Incarnation's filling full of them. In *arche*, in beginning the Word, rhyming with *bereshith*, in beginning, in Christ, God created the heavens and the earth. The triune God at work in his own special way inside Israel's scriptures, under cover within the privileged life God shared with the people of Israel. The logos *asarkos*—the word not yet made flesh—alive within the first testamental witness, because one with the only Lord God. In the language of Martin Luther, "Christ Jesus it is He, LORD Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same."

But several other things the rule would be seen to do. It ruled out pitting scripture against itself, so as to produce hotter or colder parts, some then to be rejected as false parts. It required that the totality of the witness be held in creative tension in one Lordly and coherent whole. It asked that prayer and humility accompany reading, because the difficult parts were likely to be where we would most learn, reliant now on a higher teacher than our first likes or instincts.

Sometimes their appeal to the rule of faith sounds like, the rule that the faithful possess and live by, and which we simply do not recognize in your reading of scripture or your account of Christ or his church. That is, it sounds like, something is missing or wrong or dangerous in what you are proposing, and we know that because it collides with our own present practices and handling of scripture. A kind of 'what we have you do not have' and therefore it lacks the right rule. Catholic faith is not monolithic, but it exists within a circle outside of which you have strayed. Through attenuation, selection, wrong priority, higher spiritual ascent beyond the apostolic witness, rejection of major parts, a refusal to countenance the need to be taught, favorite books, and making the first testament Christ-less. Someone else's religion en route, maybe, but only partially, if at all, to a new religion.

How the faithful sensed these outside-the-rule-of-faith threats also arose as on collision with early baptismal rites, the preaching of the church, its sacramental self-understanding in the form of emergent rites and practices, its liturgical life in time, all emanating from the scripture's total impress on the church as the Logos alive via the Holy Spirit.

This brings me to my first main biblical/ritual point. The Bible exists in relationship to the church's ruled life, which gives expression to its totality, its order, the fittingness of its parts. We have marriage rites. We ought to be able to see in them the rule of faith ordering how scripture comes to boil. When we look at them, what account of scripture do they provide?

I want to mention four components that are either given clear expression or are assumed.

The first arise in the conjunction of Genesis 1 and Christ's teaching in Matthew 19: male and femaleness as integral to the purposes of God in creation. God creates by bringing into being by his word, Jesus Christ, and by ordering. Day and night. Waters above waters below. Big light and lesser light. Male and female.

Within the modern debate, various conservative readers have sought to see in the Genesis account some deep structure of binary or complementary creational order. This could be a possible deduction, but it runs the risk of abstraction. The verbs used in Genesis 1 are not all the same from day to day. There is ‘create.’ There is ‘let there be’. There is ‘separate’ (five times). There is ‘gather.’ Some binary separations emerge as a bulwark against the chaotic ‘formless and void’ over which the Spirit of God brooded.

On the fifth day living creatures of various kinds are brought forth and for the first time the word ‘blessing’ appears, strikingly, in conjunction with the command to be fruitful and multiply. Now we are not speaking of ordered separation that will remain permanent and fixed—creation versus chaos—but of separations in the forms of species that nevertheless come together and propagate, in the light of God’s blessing them.

Day six forms the denouement not simply because God announces through a first-time ‘very good’ it to be so, but also because the creatures blessed and so capable of multiplying, we learn, are to be overseen in a special way by the male and female separated pair that are blessed and commanded to be fruitful and multiply. This humankind, this very good creation, is male and female, in the image of God. The fundamental act of differentiation is somehow mysteriously grounded in God’s own character. God creates everything through every day through his word, *arche*, with the Spirit of God mysteriously and sacramentally present. Christ is the true image and likeness of God. Male and female are created with reference to him, and in some sense mirroring the differentiation of the One God who is a fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in overcoming love.

The Rule of Faith understands the NT’s penetration into the literal sense deliverances of Genesis 1 to be faithful purchases on the eternal truth there imprinted. And they do this in no small part because in the NT, in Matthew 19:3-8, Christ refers to the ‘from the beginning’ purposes of God as eternally expressed in Genesis 1 and inseparably connected to Genesis 2. Ephesians 5:31 and 1 Corinthians 6 track along this same exegetical logic. The Rule of Faith sees to it, then, that the parts of scripture rhyme with each other. The Genesis 1 account tells of creation through the Word, through *arche*, and it is not a Hebrew myth, a past word trapped inside a history of religion (the ‘P’ source), but a Word speaking to Israel and over Israel to the church and the created world itself eternally. Even subsequent adjustments concerning divorce, such as are referred to in Matthew 19, are but hard-rhyming necessities, brought about by the hardness of human hearts as lesser evils, as the law of Moses seeks to regulate sinful, east of Eden, human fallenness.

The permanent purposes of God in Genesis 1, then, are a regular feature in marriage rites because they are reinforced in myriad ways across the mosaic of scripture whose central and focusing image is the eternal Lord Christ.

The BCP (so too the LBW) opens with this clear reference to blessing in Genesis 1: “*We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation.*” The “from the beginning” purpose of God as Christ refers to it in Matthew is the lens on which the marriage ceremony opens.

What is now frequently referred to as the second creation account goes over the same ground as Genesis 1 with more specificity. Human begetting is made possible by the stability of the heavens and the earth, and their generations: Genesis 2:4 closes account one and carefully prepares for what follows. The complementarity, the overlapping character of the accounts is what has always been assumed in the tradition as critical to how they deliver their deepest sense. Male and female are in the image of God (1:26-27). It is not good for them to be alone, 2:18 then clarifies. A helper fit for/over against the man is found, that exists nowhere else in the created realm. For the *ish*, there is the separated *ishah*, taken from him and to whom he cleaves. A man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh. Leaving father and mother does not result in being alone but in being joined and in the creating of new life. This is the life God blessed in Chapter One.

The marriage rite speaks of this second key component when it states: *The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.* Many biblical couples have no children. Indeed often this becomes the arena in which God’s mighty and wondrous, free and untamable action can occur, as with Abraham and Sarah, Elkanah and Hannah, until culminating in Mary and the Holy Spirit. Mutual joy, help, and sexual cleaving, making possible children, is fundamental to the work of God, whether such children are forthcoming or not. That remains within the mysterious purposes of God himself, inside his ordering and oversight of creation.

The marriage rite, in accordance with the rule of faith, unites the intention of God in creation with the dominical adornment and Yes in John 2. Here is the third key component. *The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.*

The word present at creation and in the ordering purposes of God becomes flesh and now is present at a wedding at Cana. His mother—styled by John as ‘woman’ here and at the Cross—is

a new woman/Eve.¹⁰ She proposes ('do whatever he tells you') and he disposes ('fill the jars with water'). The water of first creation becomes by his word the wine of his abundant, blessed, present-time creational 'very good.' His act of new-wine creation is the completion by God through the image of God, his son, of the first creational purposes of God. Working in conjunction with the obedient woman/Eve, the obedient Adam reverses the act of the first Adam. The obedient woman/Eve ('do whatever he tells you') and the New Adam manifest the glory of God made known in him. The marriage rite uses the language of adornment to capture something of the grand sacrament of John 3. Who is the man and who is the woman present at this marriage? In the rites of the church, it is the couple now standing before the selfsame work of God in Christ which the rite itself embraces and calls upon for blessing. The consistent reference to John 2 in marriage rites is the third key component.

Ephesians 5 is the next text the rite calls upon consistent with the Rule of Faith's amalgamating and according purpose. *It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored among all people.* Paul uses the language of mystery (*sacramentum*) when he concludes his commendation to the Christian household. Quoting Genesis 2 explicitly, he writes, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying it refers to Christ and his church." The sexual differentiation of man and woman, and the love that overcomes and joins them, is but a figure, a mystery, pointing to the love of God in Christ for the church of his claiming and redeeming. Here is the fourth scriptural component.

The collect of the marriage service helps us understand that it will require God's sustaining grace to bring forth the love and fidelity necessary for the solemn vows undertaken to be honored and kept. There is nothing natural or created of itself that brings about the conditions for right or lasting desire, fidelity, honor or blessing. We call upon the ever-living God, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit to bless what Christ blesses as the Word of Creation made flesh, as at that signal adornment in Cana of Galilee.

O gracious and everliving God, you have created us male and female in your image: Look mercifully upon this man and this woman who come to you seeking your blessing, and assist them with your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may honor and keep the promises and vows they make; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

¹⁰ See the fine discussion of R. Brown in his AB commentary. Protestants as well as traditional Roman Catholics both note the unusual address to Mary as 'woman' and see it as conveying this New Adam figuration (*The Gospel According to John I-XII* [AB 29; New Haven: Yale, 1970]).

As the rite proceeds, we then hear read aloud from sacred scripture those same texts that rule and order the rite being enacted (Genesis 1; Genesis 2; Song of Solomon; Tobit), reminding us of their norming character. Not as differing options, but as all together speaking forth the selfsame mystery. The same is true of NT and Gospel texts, and the Psalms appointed. Two psalms (127 and 128) speak of the gift of children. Psalm 67 speaks of the blessing of God in creation. That one Psalm may be more important given the age and hopes of the couple does not mean they are not all operating according to the same rule of faith. The earth bringing forth its increase (Ps. 67) bespeaks the blessing of Day Five, and his blessing of us through this evokes Day Six's culminating purpose. "Let all the earth fear him," picks up the solemn final line of the opening address to the couple and the congregation: *Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.*

The final blessing points to the final eschatological purposes of God, which far from eliminating the creational blessing enacted for the couple crowns and projects it.

We thank you, also, for consecrating the union of man and woman in his Name. By the power of your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of your blessing upon this man and this woman. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all peace. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking; in their joys and in their sorrows; in their life and in their death. Finally, in your mercy, bring them to that table where your saints feast for ever in your heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The prayer unites the protological purpose of God in Genesis with the eschatological hope of Revelation, inside of which the joyous and gracious notes of Song of Songs give refrain.

What the Rule of Faith guards against is selection and discrete literalism, whereby texts are not brought into conjunction and seen to be mutually illuminating, but played off of one another via chronology or simple preference. The Rule allows to arise the full-orbed network of associations the texts themselves call forth, from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2 to Hosea to the Psalms to Song of Songs to Matthew 19 and John 3, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3 and right up to the close of the NT canon (Revelation).

III. Conclusion

To speak of ethics is to speak of the scriptures' making their force known through the rites of the church that solemnize marriage in accordance with the logic of the rule of faith. I am providing only one example of such a rite from my own context. Thomas Cranmer's greatest

accomplishment was the production of deeply scriptural rites that operate within the fullest scope of the rule of faith.

Over against this accomplishment, proponents of same-sex marriage will therefore have several choices before them.

1. They can reject the plain sense articulation of the rites as such, and try to bring in a generic version that avoids the specificity of the biblical texts. This resembles the gnostic appeal to scripture as metaphor or a “for-instance,” en route to a present improvement enlivened by appeals to higher insight.
2. They can declare the rites impossible to retain and construct altogether new ones. This is closer to the marcionite instinct. Search about within the canvass of scripture for those bits that reinforce what is wanted: Jesus as engendering virtues like love and hoped-for permanence in relationships, unrelated to male and female differentiation and difference.
3. They can let either of the above options co-exist with rites such as are described above, in the between-time march for their eventual elimination.

I mention this in conclusion because these things will happen or have already begun to happen. The word ‘marriage’ is being altered and the goal of ‘marriage equality’ is now fully part of our confused cultural and religious landscape.

What Christians can do is explain, commend, and defend the logic of the rites presently in place; maintain these as a rule of faith best capturing the totality of the scripture’s witness, including Christ’s own stated logic over the breadth of the scriptural testimony to him; and be prepared to understand the identity of the church as an increasingly minority witness to the truth as handed down from scripture and the scriptural impress on preaching, catechesis and liturgical ethics over the ages. Others will operate with versions of scriptural witness that should be familiar to us from the life of the early church, where they represented distinct challenges. We may take it as a given that we will have to be as robust and clear about how scripture informs the rites we are unwilling to forfeit, no matter what other options others wish to pursue, for this present season of confusion and a poverty of rightly hearing God’s word. It can surely be no bad thing, and requisite upon us, to go to school again and hear how it is that God speaks through the totality of his word.

Especially critical will be learning how to hear the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, through the fog of developmentalism, historicism, consumerist choice, and individual preference that now blankets our churches, our culture, and our theological training centers. When Christ appeals to God’s purposes in creation he is allowing the scriptures of Israel to rhyme with his own eternal life with God, as those scripture set him forth, and as the early church will proclaim when it declares his life, death and rising as in accordance with them (1 Cor. 15:3).

As one church father put it, the rule of faith is the harmony of the covenants at the coming of the Lord. That harmony one must seek through prayer and fasting to discern. Difficulty is not overcome by selection or pitting one portion against another, but by deep penetration into the scripture's totality, where Christ lives. This is the accomplishment of the marriage rites as ethical works norming the life of those who come for His blessing, as once he adorned the marriage at Cana of Galilee.