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STANLEY HAUERWAS' APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN MARITAL AND SEX ETHICS:
A REVIEW AND SPECULATIVE EXPANSION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Rev. Jeffrey A. Schooley

May 2022

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Jeffrey A. Schooley

2022

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A REVIEW AND SPECULATIVE EXPANSION

By

Jeffrey A. Schooley

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ABSTRACT

STANLEY HAUERWAS' APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN MARITAL AND SEX ETHICS: A REVIEW AND SPECULATIVE EXPANSION

By

Jeffrey A. Schooley

May 2022

Dissertation Supervised by James Bailey

Few places in congregational and denominational life are more fraught with tension and division than conversations about marital and sex ethics. Systemic abuses mingled together with individual failures on this issue has led to confusion, conflict, and chaos. Worse yet, the remedies proposed—and they are many—tend to either double down on “Traditional” values or seek massive reformation of Christian convictions in light of Modern philosophical, anthropological, and sociological presuppositions. Interlocutors quickly come to an impasse and fragmentation occurs. The catalyst for these conflicts is often debates over same-sex marriage, but one does not have to wade far into this conversation to discover that the issues run deeper than this single topic.

This dissertation emerges from a conviction that this doesn't have to be the story of the Protestant church in America in late-20th and early-21st century culture. The opportunity to

reclaim Christian unity while maintaining a unique understanding of marriage and sex, which creates inclusive space for same-sex oriented Christians, is possible. To get there, though, the shackles of so many faulty assumptions about this topic will have to fall off and those previously bound will have to embrace the liberty offered them in a shared Christian narrative, community, and character. It is precisely these themes that theological ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, has spent a career elucidating and it is through a Hauerwasian approach that this dissertation hopes to correct the church's current broken proclamation and damaged practices of marriage and sex.

DEDICATION

To Jason LeRoy, whose friendship first challenged me to chart an inclusive path for him in the Church and whose character and laughter is strong enough to overcome those who would deny him such inclusion

To Rev. Dr. M. Craig Barnes, whose mentorship set me on this path
To the faculty members at Duquesne University who have patiently worked with me for over a decade

To the churches that have supported and sustained me during the creation of this book—
Shadyside Presbyterian Church (Pittsburgh, PA); Center Presbyterian Church (McMurray, PA);
First Presbyterian Church (Marysville, OH)

To the friends who have championed these efforts—Rev. Ben Beres, Rev. Jake Clawson, Dr. Tucker Ferda, Drs. Paul and Sarah Petrovic, Dr. Greg Veltman, Rev. Gavin Walton

And, of course...

To Brianne, whose many virtues bless my life and whose grace toward me embodies God's
Grace for me

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of Hauerwas' Works

AC	<i>After Christendom</i> (1991)
AE	<i>Approaching the End</i> (2013)
BCCE	<i>The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics</i> (2006)
BH	<i>A Better Hope</i> (2000)
CAV	<i>Christians Among the Virtues</i> (1997)
CC	<i>A Community of Character</i> (1981)
CCL	<i>Character and the Christian Life</i> (1975)
DT	<i>Disrupting Time</i> (2004)
HC	<i>Hannah's Child</i> (2010)
HR	<i>The Hauerwas Reader</i> (2001)
HS	<i>The Holy Spirit</i> (2015)
IC	<i>In Conversation</i> (2020)
IGC	<i>In Good Company</i> (1995)
Matthew	<i>Brazos Theological Commentary on Matthew</i> (2006)
MW	<i>Minding the Web</i> (2018)
PK	<i>Peaceable Kingdom</i> (1983)
RA	<i>Resident Aliens</i> (1989)
SP	<i>Suffering Presence</i> (1986)
STT	<i>Sanctify Them in the Truth</i> (1998)
SU	<i>The State of the University</i> (2007)
TT	<i>Truthfulness and Tragedy</i> (1977)

TWF	<i>Theology Without Foundations</i> (1994)
US	<i>Unleashing the Scripture</i> (1993)
VV	<i>Vision and Virtue</i> (1974)
WA	<i>Without Apology</i> (2013)
WGU	<i>With the Grain of the Universe</i> (2001)
WN	<i>Why Narrative?</i> (1997)
WW	<i>Working with Words</i> (2011)

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Introduction

Situating the Problem of Christian Marital and Sex Ethics

It is almost impossible to overstate the problem of marital and sex ethics in the contemporary church in the United States. As one author notes, both the church and contemporary American politics have encountered an impasse—related to competing views of sex “a virtual civil war that has come to seem such a disheartening and permanent part of our nation’s social and political fabric.”¹ Yet as often as Catholics, mainline Protestants, nondenominational Evangelicals, and charismatics are seen as radically different expressions of the Christian tradition, laypersons and clergy in these denominations all find common ground in the struggle over sex ethics. From the pew and pulpit, the statement of the problem is presented more as a question: What is right and good sexually and why? What is Christian marriage and what is Christian marriage for? How has the church participated in abusive behavior in the past and what is required of it now to seek healing, reconciliation, and justice? Ironically, while the conclusions arrived at are often different—and divisive—the method of arriving is startlingly similar. The singular approach that holds competing positions on this topic together—that is, that demonstrates that they are but two sides to the same coin—is the problem of myopically focusing on “marriage” and “sex,” as if they were things or actions that can be defined independently of various traditions that construct both the acts and their meanings.

Of course, there are also both books and individuals for whom this topic is so settled, so understood, that the only work left is apologetic—a continued rehashing of the same sentiments, the same ideas, the same principles, no matter what the nuances are of any counterargument. It is often these voices that gain the most traction precisely because they seem to embody a

¹ R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), viii.

confidence where the rest are feebly asking questions. It would be easy to dismiss such voices as not objective enough or privileged or arrogant or, in the words of modern-day social media, “trolling.” While some of these labels might at present be justified, these voices are to be distrusted for a different reason. The hard reality is this: holy sex and marriage is difficult. It is difficult at the outset to find and form relationships, which explains why there are so many different dating apps meant to bring people together based upon mutual interests and passions. It is difficult in its enactment, which explains the preponderance of self-help books aimed at fixing or restoring or “saving” marriages. It is difficult in its conclusion—whether that comes by the legal, economic, relational, interpersonal, and psychological nightmare that is divorce or simply just by dying and leaving a lifetime spouse alone after a lifetime of assured presence. It is difficult in its abuses, including rape, sexual harassment, and broken power relations. It is difficult through and through. Those ever-confident voices whose only work is an apologia of a particular principle betray their own usefulness—to say nothing of holiness—precisely in their confidence. This dissertation will attempt to reverse some of these problematic trends in discourses on sex in the church—while also consciously avoiding the pratfalls of over-confident apologetics—by focusing on the narrative that gives sex its meaning, the relationship between sex and Christian character, and the important role communities, especially the church, have in sustaining these narratives and forming persons with the character sufficient to engage in something as powerful as marriage and sex.

A review of these discourses on sex and marriage is necessary as differing conclusions as to what is good, holy, and just sex have evolved over the last 50 years. This reference to 50 years is not arbitrarily given. It is only within the last 50 years that legally sanctioned (and increasingly medically safe) forms of birth control and abortion have become part of ordinary medical

practices. This time period is also a rough estimate of when Victorian social mores were definitively shattered in the American context. It is also around this time that same-sex attraction went from being ignored to being nearly obsessed over. Consider, to wit, this passage from Helmut Thielicke's 1964 work, *The Ethics of Sex*,² which is found in the penultimate section titled "Borderline Situations"—a title that is, itself, fraught with heterocentric insinuations. Thielicke writes about same-sex attraction, "One cannot expect to find in the theological ethics of German-speaking Protestantism a clear, consistent attitude toward homosexuality simply because hitherto the writers on ethics have taken little or no notice of the mere fact itself and therefore a body of opinion—to say nothing of a unanimity of judgment—is almost nonexistent."³ Nearly 60 years later, there is still no clear, consistent attitude toward same-sex sexuality—or toward sexuality, in general—and certainly no "unanimity of judgment." However, Dr. Thielicke might be surprised at how much notice has been made of the fact.

To be sure, much of the relevance of this dissertation is found in its confrontation of multiple fronts of the "culture wars" attending to marriage, sex, family life, and the social structures necessary to substantiate them all. As such, some historical context—both broadly in the culture and that which pertains more specifically to the church—is useful as a backdrop to centering this work. For this conversation, for whatever its perceived import or trendiness, is hardly novel to this era. As will be seen, much of American history—and the corresponding history of the Church in America—can be mapped along lines of changing psycho-social norms for marriage, sex, and the family. While necessarily brief, the hope is that this historical review will help the reader come to understand the topics addressed in this work as proceeding from a history of the same so that, for example, we might recognize that the emotional energy expended

² Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1964).

³ *Ibid.*, 269.

for debates around same-sex marriage and cohabitation are comparable to the emotional energy of previous debates around whether women could work outside the home or if girls should be permitted to wear pants instead of dresses. Once so understood through the lens of history, our current debates may be relativized and space for a more productive conversation can be found. This is the good news of a historical review of marriage and sex in America and American Christianity. The bad news is history also shows that changes around sexual and marital norms are never incidental to other, larger cultural changes. Indeed, debates around marriage and sex are often but a symptom of a greater sickness—and, like with a symptom, worth exploring carefully if we are to better diagnose the disease. As such, while the scope of the current debated issues might be relativized, they will still tend to persist with an almost apocalyptic zeal as they become a metonym for other cultural changes of, objectively, greater consequence.

To review the history of marriage and sex in America is to begin with the colonial period, which historian Stephanie Coontz describes as “hardly stable: High mortality rates meant that the average length of marriage was less than a dozen years. One-third to one-half of all children lost at least one parent before the age of twenty-one; in the South, more than half of all children aged thirteen or under had lost at least one parent.”⁴ The economic forces of the time largely determined the content and character of family life, which is only different from today to the degree that those economic forces have shifted with time. Even still, Coontz’ contention that there is no idealized time for marriage and family is certainly established by the harrowing conditions of the colonial family. This family, of course, would not persist indefinitely and it soon gave way to the Victorian family, which came about “in the 1830s and 1840s as household production gave way to wage work and professional occupations outside the home. A new

⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 10.

division of labor by age and sex emerged among the middle class. Women's roles were redefined in terms of domesticity rather than production, men were labeled 'breadwinners' (a masculine identity unheard of in colonial days), children were said to need time to play, and gentle maternal guidance supplanted the patriarchal authoritarianism of the past."⁵ The Victorian family was the byproduct of love-marriages, a theme we will return to shortly, which was a wholly novel attempt at family creation and purpose. Yet, again driven by economic forces beyond it, the family model would change in America during and after the Great Depression as multigenerational families came back into vogue, not out of conscious, relational decision-making, but born of economic hardship. While sometimes idealized for the ways in which families stuck together, through thick and thin, financial deprivation more often than not demoralized the men who, just a generation or two before, went by the title "breadwinner" and pushed children out of familial care—whether nurturing mother or authoritarian father of yore—and into (often harsh) outside-the-home work. Yet as the Great Depression gave way to the economic boom years following World War Two, American families again saw a significant change in their constitution. Now, family was meant for self-fulfillment and pleasure. While these ends sound ostensibly nice and possibly worthy of pursuit, Coontz is quick to note that "the hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it."⁶ It will remain to be seen whether, for example, gay relationships or cohabitating relationships are truly morally injurious to their participants, but the idea that the family, marriage, and sex has been historically stable and only recently destabilized by the "issues" de

⁵ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 10-11.

⁶ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 9.

jour is roundly rejected by even this brief overview of the changing dynamics of family life in America.

While not every change in familial construction and self-understanding is as seismic as cultural handwringers of their time may opine, one change to marriage and sex has occurred in recent enough history to be considered landmark. No, contrary to today's cultural worriers, it is *not* the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but rather the love-based companionate marriages of the late eighteenth century. Indeed, today's "revolution" finds its seeds some two hundred or more year ago. Or, as Coontz puts it, "In the eighteenth century, people began to adopt the radical new idea that love should be the most fundament reason for marriage and that young people should be free to choose their marriage partners on the basis of love. The sentimentalization of the love-based marriage in the nineteenth century and its sexualization in the twentieth each represented a logical step in the evolution of this new approach to marriage."⁷ And while it is tempting to try to trace out a romantic reason for this sudden flurry of love-based marriages—to seek some song or sonnet that inspired generations to such actions—it was little more than changing economic conditions that created the love-based marriage as, "For centuries, marriage did much of the work that markets and governments do today."⁸ Just how far-reaching are capitalist markets and democratic governments? Consider this from Coontz as she recounts *former* purposes for marriage: "[Marriage] organized the production and distribution of goods and people. It set up political, economic, and military alliances. It coordinated the division of labor by gender and age. It orchestrated people's personal rights and obligations in everything from sexual relations to the inheritance of property. Most societies had

⁷ Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005) 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

very specific rules about how people should arrange their marriage to accomplish these tasks.”⁹

It is quite interesting how many of the major political issues of today are just the federal government trying to do the work that marriages used to do. These include:

- Economics (“production and distribution of goods...”)
- Immigration (“...and people”)
- War and International Treaties (“...military alliances”)
- Workplace sexual harassment (“...division of labor by gender...”)
- Child protection laws (“...and age”)
- Rape/Consent (“...from sexual relations...”)
- Inheritance taxes (“...to the inheritance of property”)

While probably most citizens of any well-established democracy—and certainly most Americans—would fully accept the government’s role in each of the above bullet points, these same folks may not be as quick to realize how new and novel it is to have the government attend to *all* these issues. Moreover, almost no one (at least without a decent knowledge of history) would be inclined to think that marriage, of all places, is where such issues are to be confronted and decided. Yet it also helps make sense of how the love-based marriage came into existence as, once all these vital requirements were sheered from marriage, there was little left for it to *do* than to focus on and foster love. Of course, it is by no means clear that this is what marriage is actually for, and this is especially true for Christians. As Coontz notes, “In Christian texts prior to the seventeenth century, the word *love* usually referred to feelings toward God or neighbors rather than toward a spouse.”¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

Once the Christian view of marriage is introduced into the broader, cultural conversation, an odd form of syncretism and rejection begins to occur. Notably, the Romantic accounting of love-based marriages, while not necessarily biblical in any manner, is integrated into (especially white) American Protestant theology. At the same time, the “sexual revolution” is seemingly rejected for its hedonism, decadence, and indecency. “Seemingly” for reasons that will be noted in a moment, though first we do well to recognize that viewed against the backdrop of both cultural and Christian histories of marriage, the companionate love-based marriage is as relationally and interpersonally hedonistic as the traversing of all sexual taboos in the sexual revolution was corporeally and bodily hedonistic. That is to say, that much of the squeamishness around the then-new sexual attitudes of the mid-twentieth century has more to do with a Christian theology that is discomforted by the body and tends to favor a more soul-based soteriology. Romantic, love-based marriages were more easily incorporated into a soteriologically-focused Christianity for the simple fact that a theology rooted in “saving the soul” is going to be more accommodating to finding one’s “soulmate” than it is to exercising one’s body in sexual gratification.

Yet the Church’s puritanical, Victorian pearl-clutching is oft exaggerated because no sooner had the so-called sexual revolution taken place than the (especially Evangelical) church began to scout out its position within—and even appropriation of—the change. As one scholar notes, “evangelicals did not turn away from the sexual liberation movement begun in the 1960s, they simply made it their own, publishing sex manuals, running sex workshops, and holding counseling sessions to instruct husbands and wives on the best techniques for a sexually satisfied marriage.”¹¹ As might be expected, even amongst those who embraced the sexual revolution as a

¹¹ Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

foothold for creating a contrastive, Christian model—that was still sex-positive—there were disputes about which sex acts were or were not beneficial for Christian discipleship. The result was a boom in Christian publishing of “sex manuals” for use as both marital and discipleship aides. Yet, ultimately, even with the focus—often very detailed and concrete¹²—on sex, Christians are often working out more than their next marriage-bed maneuver, for sex and marriage became a way in which negotiate their place in American culture. As DeRogatis notes, knowingly or not hearkening back to Foucault’s assertion that sex is always passed through the mill of speech, “Writing, thinking, talking, expounding on sexuality is never just about sex. American evangelicals talk a lot about sex and a lot about salvation. In the process, they are working through their relationship with American culture.”¹³ Of course, at the same time, this particular response to cultural trends in marriage and sex—namely, the creation of sex manuals as both descriptive and proscriptive guides—had the inadvertent effect of creating an idealized Christian couple. This idealized vision of Christian marriage and sex necessarily creates insiders and outsiders based upon who can maintain the right sort of purity in the face of temptations, which is a burden that is especially placed on children and youth in Evangelical, Christian circles—and, then, placed more upon girls and young women than their male counterparts. Naturally, of course, these ideals are not presented in order to create insiders/outsider. Rather, “Born-again Christians are told that if they follow the biblical rules about sexuality their lives and their marriages will be blessed. But it offers little to those among the faithful who do not achieve the biblical model.”¹⁴ In many regards, the focus of this dissertation is to figure out if

¹² DeRogatis cites more than one sex manual that more or less scripts the first sexual encounter between two (presumed) virgins on the night of their marriage, including typical duration of foreplay, body position, and the life. Cf. DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 54-57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

there is any Good News for “those among the faithful who do not achieve the [constrictive, dubiously-labeled] biblical model.”

Yet, while concern for those who may not fit the ideals created by the Church in its incoherent response to cultural changes in marriage and love is a worthy goal, even if born of unfortunate exclusion of some, for some Christians, the stakes are much, much higher. For the creation of sex manuals for married Christian couples is comparatively innocuous to the ratcheted stakes often placed on changing marital and sexual norms. As one commentator notes, “sex has been both a source of profound fear and an effective tool for fueling the most basic political clashes and power struggles of recent American history.”¹⁵ When sex and marriage are the topics, often much more than sex and marriage is in play because “sexual purity rhetoric... has upheld the white, middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear, Christian family as the foundation of American national strength.”¹⁶ For the history of America’s discussion around marital and sexual norms is often a proxy for its existential concerns for national and global security. The reasoning goes that sexual license creates the conditions for weakness which is more easily exploited by America’s enemies.¹⁷ As religion professor at Central Michigan University, Sara Moslener, notes

For much of their history, sexual purity movements have been calls for collective action and social change, calls that have drawn upon theories of race and gender, formulations of national identity, and evangelical theologies in order to articulate the ways in which the nation’s future is imperiled by sexual immorality. Rooted in fears of national instability and civilizational decline, the idea of sexual purity has been most compelling at points in history when evangelical theologies of the end-times provided viable explanations for widespread cultural crises.¹⁸

¹⁵ Griffith, xx.

¹⁶ Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

¹⁷ It is worth noting here the presumption that America will have enemies. Also, one wonders if a sort of inverse is also true, namely that if we established world peace that any and all forms of sexual experimentation would not only be licensed, but encouraged.

¹⁸ Moslener, 2-3.

It is easy to see why “culture war” is an apt way to frame the debates around the role, purpose, and import of marriage in sex—both in the culture and in the church—for nothing short of national security may be at stake in the conversation. Ironically, of course, history teaches us that economics and war are more likely to change the form and content of marriage than marriages are to change a nation’s economic and national security. Yet maybe that inversion is a sort of Freudian slip, a backwards confession, that the ways in which we order our economic and political realities is determinative of the sorts of marriages and families we will have. Whatever the precise order, however, it is clear why the rhetoric is turned up in temperature so quickly. And lest the church be accused of as the lone instigator in this culture war, more secular sources are equally as inflammatory with one commentator drawing the binary between “erotophobes” and “erotophiles,”¹⁹ and declaring the former to be “sexual jihadists,”²⁰ who seek “to control sexual expression, colonize sexual imagination, and restrict sexual choices.”²¹ Phobia, jihadist, references to colonialism, it is unsurprising that this commentator labels (at least certain factions of) the Church “Christian-American Taliban.”²² It is into this live-shooter culture war that this dissertation seeks to remedy the Church’s own moral incoherence around marriage and sex, while remaining sensitive to cultural factors—especially economic factors—that often underpin what otherwise attempts to pass as ethics.

Central to pursuing the clarity needed in the church today around Christian marital and sex ethics is the theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas. On a topic that has created so much division—including the separation of many mainline Protestant denominations into two or more

¹⁹ Cf. Marty Klein, *America’s War on Sex: The Continuing Attack on Law, Lust, and Liberty* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

denominations—Hauerwas’ approach is uniquely critical of all sides with the hope that with repentance comes Spirit-led unity. On a topic that has created so much heat, Hauerwas shines a stunning light. As will be demonstrated throughout the dissertation, Hauerwas is uniquely effective in grounding his ethics in a thick narrative, substantiated by Christian communities, and central to each Christian’s on-going growth in character. Narrative, community, and character undergird his methodology in a way that is typically lacking in most other discourse on sex and marital ethics—both in the church and more broadly. Much more will be said about Hauerwas’ theological ethics, but its primary asset to this particular topic (if not in general) is how unindebted it is to Modern liberalism. By Modern liberalism, I mean the philosophical movement begun in the Enlightenment—and all its correlating changes in other fields such as theology, politics, and economics—that centers of the agency of the rational, choosing individual. The depths of Modern liberalism’s influence on the Church and history are too great to recount here, but Hauerwas’ theological ethics is one of the best at unwinding the Church from this pagan philosophy in the hopes that the Church might have a more vibrant, authentic witness to provide the world. And, since marriage and sex has already been demonstrated to be a topic whose significance ranges from the interpersonal to the international, it is an ideal topic to approach in a Hauerwasian manner.

“Hauerwasian” is key here, for while the early chapters of this work will be dedicated to presenting and critically engaging Hauerwas’ theological ethics, the latter half will be dedicated to those topics about which Hauerwas is either inconsistent or absent in the conversation. Specifically, the contemporary Church’s twin challenges of same-sex marriage inclusion and cohabitation are topics which are ripe for a Hauerwasian treatment. These topics, however, are not only chosen because Hauerwas has left room for work on them, but also because they are so

pertinent to the Church today. I am an ordained, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor, presently serving a mid-sized church in the Midwest. To the degree that my congregants want to discuss issues of marriage and sex, which is not a great deal, the recurring reasons for any such discussion is either same-sex marriage or cohabitation. Given the more aged, generally speaking, demography of the average PCUSA congregation, these are topics that are raised in terms of concern for children and/or grandchildren. Yet, clearly, they are the prevailing issues within the broader range of ethical issues that might fall under a “marriage and sex” umbrella. They are also places of conflict (same-sex marriage) and confusion (cohabitation) in the Church. Of the two topics, same-sex marriage has more vocal proponents and opponents. As a result, this work will dedicate two chapters to the topic.

And so, going forward, this book is structured thusly: Chapter one will reviewed Hauerwas’ 50-year career, spanning 40 published books and scores of essays, almost all of which have been written in an occasional, rather than systematic, manner. The goal for this chapter will be to learn how to think theologically *with* Hauerwas. Doing so will mean learning the content and connection between three major themes in his works—narrative, community, and character. This chapter will also feature critics of Hauerwas, though their criticisms will be found wanting in comparison to Hauerwas’ overall contribution.

Chapter two will move to the general topic at hand—marriage and sex. For a theologian largely known as a pacifist, Hauerwas has a surprising amount of literature dedicated to marriage, sex, family, singleness, children, abortion, and issues pertaining to conception. A thorough review, without appeal to critiques, will be made of this work as the foundation for what is to come in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter three will be the first of two chapters dedicated to same-sex marriage in the Church. This dissertation is unapologetically inclusive in its posture toward marriage rites for gay Christians. As such, chapter three will *not* be some sort of pro-cons/support-opposition review. Instead, only proponents of same-sex marriage will be considered. However, as the reader will come to see, not all arguments in favor of same-sex marriage are of equal value and validity. And, since this topic is of the utmost importance to the Church—certainly for gay Christians, but also for all Christians—only the best theological rationale for inclusion is acceptable. This means critically engaging others who clearly share the same *telos* to their work. Why pursue the criticism of potential allies? First, because the very act of framing this ecclesial discussion about same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church around concepts like “allies” only perpetuates a culture war (and anti-pacifist tendency) that is clearly contra-Hauerwas. Second, because “the ends justify the means” is also thoroughly contra-Hauerwas. As such, critical engagement of like-oriented scholars will create space for a more robust theological appraisal of same-sex marriage in the Church.

Chapter four, then, utilizes a Hauerwasian approach—informed by narrative, community, and character—to substantiate the claim for same-sex marriage inclusion. It does so because Hauerwas is inconsistent on this topic, ranging from a procreative-centered prohibition to a begrudging, trial acceptance. This inconsistency creates room for an outsider to think in a Hauerwasian manner about a topic that Hauerwas has otherwise written about.

Finally, chapter five will be the greatest challenge in terms of thinking in a Hauerwasian manner, for its topic—cohabitation—is not one on which Hauerwas has written anything. As such, a review of other Christian scholars will be paired with insights from the social sciences to demonstrate that discussions about cohabitation are often just veiled discussions about economic

injustice. Yet lest this topic be abandoned to the economists, the increasingly central role cohabitation is playing in the lives of Christians will be taken seriously and an attempt to retrieve some of the liturgical resources from Christian history will be made not so much to justify these relationships, but to recenter them within a practice and office of the Church.

These are topics for which there is great emotional energy, perceived cultural import, and increasing ecclesial disunity and schism. They are topics that challenge institutional resiliency and well-being, while simultaneously presenting as very real, very personal. Not many topics in ethics runs the spectrum from interpersonal to institutional. Yet this is precisely what gives this topic such significance. It can be, and is, at once both about the Church's broad witness of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world *and* a personal spiritual discipline and place of sanctification and growth in the faith. And while the form marriage and sex take will not vary significantly between the Church and the world—marriages still tend to look similar; sex is still performed in like ways—the content of marriage and sex, the narrative, community, and character that make them intelligible for Christians, is significant and easily reveals the difference Christ makes.

Chapter 1

Hauerwas' Theological Ethics: Review, Critique, and Response

Identifying and categorizing Stanley Hauerwas' theological ethics is a fool's errand. At different points in his career, Hauerwas has presented himself and/or been regarded as a virtue ethicist focusing on character²³, a narrative theologian²⁴, and a postliberal theologian,²⁵ possibly in the spirit of Karl Barth²⁶. He will even go to great lengths to persuade others that he is a natural theologian²⁷. Each of these designations are true; none of them are fully adequate. His ecclesial identity is just as messy as his academic interests. A cradle-born Methodist²⁸, he finds himself simultaneously comfortable with the Roman Catholic tradition and those in the Radical Reformation²⁹—and uneasy in both. He does not settle in any denomination and largely regards them as artifacts of a Constantinian Christianity that has now largely—and, he might add, happily—ceased to exist, especially in Europe and North America³⁰. Yet as ambivalent as he is

²³ See: Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981, copyright 1974); Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994, copyright 1975) Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997).

²⁴ See: Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997); Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

²⁵ See: Stanley Hauerwas, Nancy Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). However, it is also worth noting that Hauerwas does *not* abide by this title. As he says, “what postliberal names (and it’s a phrase I’m not very happy with) is the presumption that there is a foundation account of knowledge that Christianity may be an exemplification of, and that’s the way you are able to claim it is true in a way that you don’t claim about other things. The problem with that is the foundation account becomes more determinative than the crucifixion.” [Samuel Wells and Stanley Hauerwas, *In Conversation*, as facilitated by Maureen Knudsen Langdoc (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020), 36.]

²⁶ See: David B. Hunsicker, *The Making of Stanley Hauerwas: Bridging Barth and Postliberalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic Press, 2019).

²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

²⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 1-3.

²⁹ Hauerwas infamously refers to himself as “a high-church Mennonite,” which is a colorful description that may mean very little. See: Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 6.

³⁰ Ariaan Baan summarizes this point the best when he writes, “Along with Hauerwas, I believe that denominational differences are of minor interest in theology these days, and that Christian theologians must write for all

toward denominations, he loves the Church community for its import in doing theological ethics communally and not individually,³¹ and the unique witness the Church offers the world, especially through its liturgy³². Clearly, this is not a scholar for whom labels will work, even if his detractors have sought to hang them around his neck like a millstone³³.

And he does court detractors. As L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell writes in their introduction to *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, “he is a contrarian and a polemicist, drawn to exaggerated pronouncements in the passionate service of compelling others to see things differently—or at least in the interest of stirring up a more lively debate,”³⁴ and this is how his friends talk about him. To note Hauerwas’ polemical nature is not to claim that his detractors are just more easily riled—that is, to claim that they are responding emotionally and not intellectually—but rather to caution the reader as to Hauerwas’ style. It also provides a partial apology for this style, informing or reminding readers of Hauerwas that inflammatory language and declarations are no mere slip in character, but an intentional decision meant to elicit response and inspire more faithful action. Finally, such pronouncements might just be the inevitable byproduct of writing in the occasional nature that he does; a nature that is far from systematic.

denominations. Thus when I speak of the church, I refer to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church represented by all denominations accepting the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and when I speak of Christians’ vocation to be witness, I think of all people who consider themselves Christians.” Ariaan Baan, *The Necessity of Witness: Stanley Hauerwas’s Contribution to Systematic Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 9.

³¹ See: Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*; Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People who Know that Something is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

³² See: Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

³³ See: James M. Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (January 1, 2013). Accessed July 12, 2021. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/3298>; Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

³⁴ L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 8.

Contingency and occasion are dominant marks in Hauerwas' methodology. The result of this decision, presumably intentional on his part, is that he eschews systemization of his theological ethics. However, with this caveat noted, we can still acknowledge that three foci center Hauerwas' work: narrative, community, and character. Like three circles on a Venn diagram overlaying one another, each elucidates the other and none ever get the final word on the rest. The goal is to invite the reader to best understand what Hauerwas means by narrative, community, and character, and to—as best is possible given the nature of Hauerwas' writings—display their interdependence. These overlapping foci are a result of Hauerwas' thorough work in recognizing that each is unintelligible without the other. Character, for instance, is only formed in relation to a particular community that carries understandings of what is and is not virtuous in that community. Community, at the same time, is only intelligible based upon a particular narrative that forms the community, giving it shape, distinction, meaning and boundaries. Finally, narratives contain no *a priori* power or influence—indeed, they do not exist—without communities who form them in order to be formed by them. Each of these points, given here in brief, will be expanded upon below with both their uniqueness and connections elucidated.

While each section will be unique to the specific content of each, one recurring feature will be to examine each and their relationship to contingency. Commentators on Hauerwas are only just beginning to pluck at the thread of contingency in his writings, though he has noted it since at least 1980³⁵. As Hauerwas writes, “For if Aristotle is right that ethics deals those matters that can be otherwise, then ethics must deal with particular and contingent events and relations.”³⁶ As an oft-overlooked aspect of Hauerwas' writings, contingency may be able to help

³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, “Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life” (1980) in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 201), 221-254.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 226, fn. 8.

connect narrative, community, and character in ways that desystematizes the artificial systemization employed below. At the very least, focusing on contingency will stay honest to Hauerwas' theological ethics as, by his own confession, "Contingency is the heart of so much that I do."³⁷

NARRATIVE

Introduction

Hauerwas, writing with L. Gregory Jones at the height of his narrative interests, is already cautious about all the narrative might pursue. In the Introduction to *Why Narrative?* (1997), the two write,

After all, it is not readily obvious what, if anything, the varieties of appeals to narrative have in common. The category of narrative has been used, among other purposes, to explain human action, to articulate the structures of human consciousness, to depict the identity of agents (whether human or divine), to explain strategies of reading (whether specifically for biblical texts or as a more general hermeneutic), to justify a view of the importance of 'story-telling' (often in religious studies through the language of 'fables' and 'myths'), to account for the historical development of traditions, to provide an alternative to foundationalist and/or other scientific epistemologies, and to develop a means for imposing order on what is otherwise chaos.³⁸

When narrative can mean this much, it may very well mean nothing at all.

As such, while Hauerwas will dabble in many aspects of the above litany, it is clear that he has always had—or, at least, had always been devising—a sense of narrative that is pre-theory; an understanding of narrative as relayed by the narrative of scripture and the Church's traditions (including its liturgy) itself. It isn't overly confident to claim that Hauerwas utilizes the "fad"³⁹ of the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences as a way to create space for the intelligibility of his own theological ethics and their claims about narrative. To move, then, from

³⁷ Brian Brock and Stanley Hauerwas, edited by Kevin Hargaden, *Beginnings: Interrogating Hauerwas* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018).

³⁸ *WN*, 2.

³⁹ *WN*, 1.

narrative in its many forms to the narrative Hauerwas finds constructive for theological ethics we must attend to his understanding of narrative, generally—which has been inspired largely by Stanley Fish—then to the specific narratives of Israel and Jesus, which is also a way of engaging Scripture as narrative. We will then introduce two key commentators on Hauerwas’ use of narrative—Richard B. Hays and Samuel Wells. Hays provides a heuristic of four modes of narrative discourse in Scripture that helps us bring into sharper contrast Hauerwas’ primary mode of reading scripture. Wells also provides a helpful heuristic of “narrative from below” and “narrative from above” to better understand how narrative constructs the self/agent in Hauerwas’ theological ethics. Finally, we will address contingency and narrative.

Narrative, Generally Understood

Following Stanley Fish, Hauerwas writes about narrative (or “texts”) that they “themselves only emerge as the consequence of interpretive acts”⁴⁰ and “that texts only exist in a continuing web of interpretive practices.”⁴¹ Writing against both fundamentalists and historical-critical scholars of the Bible⁴², Hauerwas is recentering the meaning of texts or narratives from the written word itself to the practice and performance of interpretation. Meaning does not live in a narrative as the essence or purpose of the narrative. The narrative, indeed, cannot exist without both author and reader. Contrary to “authorial intention,” it is the reader who makes the meaning. Yet contrary a Reader Response Theory, it is not the lone reader with the sole authority of both interpreting and making a text a narrative, but rather the reader in a community of readers whose very act of engaging with the text both make the text and the text’s meaning.

⁴⁰ *US*, 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴² As Hauerwas writes, “Indeed literalist-fundamentalism and the critical approaches to the Bible are but two sides of the same coin, insofar as each assumes that the text should be accessible to anyone without the necessary mediation by the Church” (*US*, 17).

The result of this approach is that all texts are “political,”—not, necessarily, in the sense that they participate in or pertain to issues of the modern nation-state, but rather that they assume and perform a particular politic, a particular way of living or understanding the common good. Hauerwas is not shy about being “political” (even with as much confusion as that word might produce) for, as he writes, “Interpretation is not an objective science because, from beginning to end, it is an exercise in politics. It is not only about power and authority, but also about shared goods and judgments that constitute a history worth remembering for a people.”⁴³ Already we catch glimpses that narrative is in service to a people, a community, and that without such a people and community, narrative is devoid of meaning and purpose. Unlike “laws” that are understood to govern creation—gravity, thermodynamics, etc.—which could provide a (at least) presumed objective measure against which to judge interpretation, narrative is a political act—a struggle, a discipline, a holy pursuit—undertaken by people as they seek to express and understand the values and virtues that hold them together as a people.

One inevitable concern that arises out of such an understanding of narrative is that of fragmentation. If narrative—and, especially for the Church, if Scripture—is produced in the act of interpretation, then it is easily possible for communities to separate, silo, or split into camps of interpretive meaning. This is why, for Hauerwas, there must be substantive practices that precede the act of interpretation; acts of character building and sacramental acts. As Hauerwas writes, regarding character and the meaning-making of interpreting narratives, “No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth-grade

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

commencements. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encourage to read the Bible on their own.”⁴⁴ Inflammatory in tone, Hauerwas is signaling the importance of character preceding interpretation lest the interpretation be found wanting for the good of the community. And, for Hauerwas, one of the chief ways in which our character is formed is through the sacraments of the church; a point which leads him to laud the Roman Catholic Church. “The Roman Catholics conclude that any church cannot rightly read the Scripture if it is divided from itself in a way that makes it impossible for people to celebrate the Eucharist with one another in the union with Christ.”⁴⁵ (23) Once so formed by eucharistic union, Christians are not immediately restricted to a particular reading, but rather find freedom in the sacrament and the authority of the church to pursue a multiplicity of readings for the sake of the community⁴⁶.

While this subsection began with a promise to focus on narrative, generally, it inevitably began to move toward the central narrative of the Church: Scripture. And so, to Scripture specifically we must now turn.

Scripture: The Narrative of Israel

Central to Hauerwas’ reading of Scripture writ large—and thus, of course, to the Hebrew Scripture—is the conviction that the people of God are to be imitators of God. This heritage of imitation would extend across “testaments” so that Jesus’ instruction in His Sermon on the Mount reads thus: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).⁴⁷ This

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁶ As Hauerwas writes, “Protestants often hear such claims as restrictive, arrogant, and authoritarian; in fact this doctrine is meant to effect the opposite reaction. Exactly because there is an office of unity more profound than a biblical text, Catholics can encourage many readings of Scripture” (*US*, 23).

⁴⁷ As Hauerwas writes, “We are called to be like God: perfect as God is perfect. It is a perfection that comes by learning to follow and be like this man whom God has sent to be our forerunner in the kingdom. That is why Christian ethics is not first of all an ethics of principles, laws, or values, but an ethic that demands we attend to the

proclamation is not a new witness to life with God but has been informed by Israel's long history with God, including its Scriptures. This is more summation than initiation for "it was Israel's conviction, as displayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, that a series of events in her history was decisive for God's relation to mankind [sic]. In these events God had spoken, and Israel constantly returned to them to guide her future relations with God."⁴⁸ The central event—the Exodus—to Israel's life with God is recorded in the Torah, which taught Israel "to walk in the way of God meant that Israel must be obedient to the commands (Deut. 8:6); to fear the Lord (Deut. 10:12); to love the Lord (Deut. 11:22); and thus to be perfect in the way (Gen. 17:1). But the way of obedience is also the way of intimacy, for Israel is nothing less than God's 'first-born son' (Ex. 4:22)."⁴⁹ Thus, even the prophets are but part of the interpretive community that "summons [Israel] to return to the vocation of an *imitator Dei*."⁵⁰ As, ultimate, precursor to the coming Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's communal life together—formed, at least in part, in its interpretive practices of imitating God—led to the creation "of the major offices in Israel—king, priest, and prophet—[that] also drew its substance from the need for Israel to have a visible exemplar to show how to follow the Lord."⁵¹ And these offices, and office holders, "were judged by how well they dedicated their lives to being suitable models for the people to imitate."⁵²

Israel is a story-formed community whose purpose is to imitate the Lord who brought them out of slavery and into liberation, who made them a people, who gave them a place, who instituted a rule of life together by which to be imitators, and who received liturgical practices of

life of a particular individual—Jesus of Nazareth. It is only from him that we can learn perfection—which is at the very least nothing less than forgiving our enemies." Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 75-76.

⁴⁸ *PK*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 78.

worship through which they enacted this story across generations. Israel, as a people formed prior to a story, is a witness to the political nature of narrative noted above. That God calls Abram and creates a people of God (who would later be called “Israel”) *prior* to giving the law or inspiring the Torah or in any other way creating a “text” is constitutive of how God works in the world and how we ought to understand the role of narrative in theological ethics. For to presume a narrative prior to a people is to employ a politic foreign to God’s self-revelation in and through history; it is to court a more modernist, individualist form of narrative that takes the shape of the autonomous individual of liberalism. Thus, rather than people being formed by the story, they form narrative in their own likeness. By doing so, they reduce God’s actual work in the world to mere principles and theological ethics is led astray before it can make a substantive contribution.

Scripture: The Story of Jesus

Ultimately, Israel’s need for visible exemplars for imitation led to the “tendency in Israel for the three functions to coalesce in one figure.”⁵³ While Israel would, on occasion, raise up potential figures to fill those role (such as Moses), it was the practice of seeking such a coalescing figure that provide the “background that the early Christians came to understand and believe in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection... Jesus’ life was seen as the recapitulation of the life of Israel and thus presented the very life of God in the world.”⁵⁴ Focused now, as we must be, on Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah, it is important to note that Jesus does not come preaching about Himself, but rather about the Kingdom of God. Narratively understood, this Kingdom is a story of how God rules in the world, presented not as theory or principle, but in the very life of Jesus Himself. Importantly, for Hauerwas, “the kingdom is not simply some cipher

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 78.

that we can fill in with our ideas about what a good society ought to look like. Nor is it merely a way of reemphasizing the eternal sovereignty of God.”⁵⁵ Instead, this kingdom takes its distinct shape as it is presented in the life of Jesus the Christ, specifically in His crucifixion and resurrection. With Hauerwas’ well-known emphasis on pacifism, this means, at the very least, that God “will not have peace through coercion. Peace will come only through the worship of the one God who chooses to rule the world through the power of love, which the world can only perceive as weakness.”⁵⁶ This “weakness” is the weakness of the crucifixion, of a God who can and does suffer and die. Such an act upends the assumptions of power at work in the world. The cross is central to the narrative of Jesus’ life because

The cross is not just a symbol of God’s kingdom; it is that kingdom come. It is only by God’s grace that we are enabled to accept the invitation to be part of that kingdom. Because we have confidence that God has raised this crucified man, we believe that forgiveness and love are alternatives to the coercion the world thinks necessary for existence, thus, our true nature, our true end, is *revealed in the story of this man* in whose life, we believe is to be found the truth.⁵⁷

To speak of the story of Jesus is to speak to the cross and resurrection, not only as events that occurred, but as revelations as to *how* God works in the world.

It is also significant that Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom is often done through storied forms called “parables.” If narrative is central to Hauerwas’ theological ethics, and if narrative describes the interpretive practices of a particular people for the sake of making meaning to the benefit of their life together, then the parables are just further exhibitions of this approach to narrative. Indeed, Jesus’ own disciples are confused by much of what Jesus says⁵⁸ precisely because they have yet to intuit or understand that theirs is a role of interpreting as constitutive act

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82-83.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 87 – emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ See: Matthew 13:10.

of community creation and kingdom revelation. And while Jesus will explain certain parables to His disciples, this is not to be taken as an act of revealing an essential message already contained within the parable. Rather, it is to be seen as an extension of Jesus' incarnation—that is, in the incarnation, God has joined the interpretive community of God's people as member and not just subject. Jesus, therefore, in explaining something like the parable of the sower⁵⁹ is *modeling* discipleship, not explaining it. The import of the interpretive community for understanding the parables is well articulated in Hauerwas' commentary on Matthew.⁶⁰ As he writes there, “The parable... have always been crucial for the church to imagine the kind of community that we must be[...]. The boat on which Jesus sits to deliver his parabolic sermon on the parables is the church that the parables bring into being.”⁶¹ The church is the “boat,” that is, the community that keeps these words afloat across scores of generations that each generation might be invited into the interpretive community, trained in the virtues necessary for right interpretation, and dispatched to the discipline of interpretation. Put simply, the story can only be given if it rests upon a story-formed people.

The nature of narrative, and of Scripture, is such for the Church that the life of Jesus is a truly historical fact—that is, not only an actual, factual event in the past, but also a life that remains alive in the world today as the Church functions as the interpretive community of this life. That this life is recorded in written form in the gospels, and that other written forms are added even unto this in the epistles, is significant for how the Church views and understands Scripture and thus the life of Jesus. As Hauerwas notes, “the letters of Paul to the Corinthians are quite differently understood once they become Scripture and are located in relationship to the

⁵⁹ See: Matthew 13:18-23.

⁶⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

⁶¹ *Matthew*, 126. It is worth noting that this quotation comes from Hauerwas' commentary on Matthew 13, the same chapter cited in my explanation of the parables above.

other letters of Paul in the New Testament as well as the Gospels.”⁶² As one can anticipate now better understanding Hauerwas’ account of narrative, even with these letters to the Corinthian church “Paul becomes one interpreter among others of his letters. If Paul could appear among us today to tell us what he ‘really meant’ when he wrote, for example, 1 Corinthians 13, his view would not necessarily count more than Gregory’s or Luther’s account of Corinthians. There simply is no ‘real meaning’ of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians once we understand that they are no longer Paul’s letters but rather the Church’s Scripture.”⁶³

Such a claim can easily sound presumptuous, even boastful, if approached without understanding Hauerwas’ sense of narrative. Even within such an understanding, it leaves a certain humility unaccounted for because, to be sure, the interpretive practice of narrative formation Hauerwas recommends is a far humbler performance than any other approach to engaging narrative. This is a point better elucidated by Hauerwas’ commentary on Matthew, in whose introduction Hauerwas notes, “I have not tried to write about Matthew. I have tried to write with Matthew, assuming that the gospel was written for us”⁶⁴ and “I have tried to submit to Matthew’s discipline.”⁶⁵ To be made part of an interpretive community is to also learn how to submit to that community—to interpret in a manner consonant with the purposes of authors, to focus as much on the *how* as the *what* and certainly more than the *why*. Pursued as such, something like “authorial intention” is not an artifact of the past to be retrieved, but a power in the present to be (re)articulated.

Earlier I noted how the eucharistic practice of the Roman Catholic Church provided a context for the rightful interpretation of Scripture that even permitted a certain unity-in-diversity.

⁶² *US*, 21.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁴ *Matthew*, 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

While Hauerwas' example of 1 Corinthians 13 from *Unleashing the Scripture* may have sounded like authoritarianism run amuck on authorial intention, his humbler, softened approach from his Matthew commentary reveals that the unity offered us in eucharistic practices is not meant only for today's, living interpreters, but holds us together—truly in a “catholic” manner—with even the earliest disciples with whom we can now write “with.” Writing “with” means the purposes, ambitions, hopes of past disciples remain present, albeit newly and uniquely articulated in our own context.⁶⁶ Add to this catholic, apostolic nature of narrative creation and interpretation the previous note that even the Christ Himself joins the interpretive community and narrative becomes but another extension of a eucharistic life together.

Narrative Modes of Scripture: Reading with Richard B. Hays

A theological ethics that is meant to be done in community such as the one Hauerwas offers requires, even more than normal, critical engagement with those who read/read alongside Hauerwas. It is in this spirit that we turn to the first of two fellow interpreters, Richard B. Hays. Hays, a colleague of Hauerwas' at Duke Divinity School and professor of New Testament, forays into theological ethics with *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.⁶⁷ Hays' own approach is clearly sympathetic to Hauerwas' to the degree that he acknowledges the complexity of the images used throughout Scripture. Where the two separate is that, for Hays, the resolution to this tension of diversity is found in “a cluster—or, better, a sequence—of images to represent the underlying story and bring the texts into focus.”⁶⁸ As is evident, Hays has accepted, *a priori*, the notion of a “story” the underlies the text, and has forsaken the community in the entire

⁶⁶ As Hauerwas notes, “I believe Matthew wrote to make us disciples of Christ” (*Matthew*, 19), which is the same motivation that animates Hauerwas' commentary on Matthew's gospel.

⁶⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

⁶⁸ Hays, 196.

process, except as “the primary addressee of God’s imperatives.”⁶⁹ Thus, the community is recipient, not interpreter; beneficiary, not enactor.

Oriented as he is by the “underlying story” and focused on images and categories that help structure our encounter with Scripture, Hays almost-scientifically provides four categories, “modes of appeal to scripture”⁷⁰:

- *Rules*: direct commandments or prohibitions of specific behaviors.
- *Principles*: general frameworks of moral consideration by which particular decisions about action are to be governed.
- *Paradigms*: stories or summary accounts of characters who model exemplary conduct (or negative paradigms: characters who model reprehensible conduct).
- *A symbolic world* that creates the perceptual categories through which we interpret reality.⁷¹

As may be evident from above, Hauerwas spends little time on rules, eschews principles, only gives glancing attention to paradigms, and centers his entire approach to narrative in his theological ethics on “symbolic world.”⁷² While Hays will ultimately raise concerns about Hauerwas’ narrative approach, it is evident that he understands this approach well, even charting the course from when Hauerwas “appropriated from Hans Frei an emphasis—derived ultimately from Karl Barth—on narrative as the basic and proper mode of presenting the gospel”⁷³ to “partly under the influence of Stanley Fish... an aggressively postmodern phase, denying that texts, including the Bible, have meaning save as they are construed within particular interpretive

⁶⁹ Ibid., 196.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁷¹ Ibid., 209—emphasis original.

⁷² Cf. Hays, 262. It is significant that two of Hauerwas’ most popular works—*The Peaceable Kingdom* and *Resident Aliens*—are rather “symbolic world” titles.

⁷³ Ibid., 254.

communities.”⁷⁴ Thus, the inclusion of Hays here is meant to (1) further elucidate Hauerwas’ narrative approach and (2) set the groundwork for criticism of this approach (though the full thrust of this critique will have to await the “Community” section below).

Hays rightly presents Hauerwas’ narrative approach by stating “obedience must precede understanding,”⁷⁵ a point he highlights by contrasting Hauerwas with one of his close colleagues and mentor, John Howard Yoder: “Whereas Yoder maintains that a right reading of the New Testament’s portrayal of Jesus must provide the norms for the life of the church, Hauerwas characteristically puts the matter the other way around: the church must be a truthful and peaceable community in order to be able to read the New Testament’s portrayal of Jesus rightly.”⁷⁶ When challenged as to how Christian can learn to live rightly if not first or primarily from Scripture, Hays understands Hauerwas as appealing to the lives of the saints (“saints,” for Hauerwas, are not reserved only for those so canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, but includes any faithful forebear to the faith) and through the church’s liturgy, especially the eucharist. Since reading and interpreting Scripture rightly is predicated upon being a virtuous member of the people of God, an interpretive community, the role of historical-critical scholars (like Hays) is relativized, even as—as Hays is quick to note—Hauerwas has benefitted from such critics at different points in his career. Hays come close to claiming that Hauerwas creates a tautology in which, by eschewing historical-critical scholarship, Hauerwas can also avoid asking difficult questions of specific passage of scripture because “such onerous interpretive tasks are said to be rendered unnecessary by participation in a community that already ‘rightly’ knows and practices what the text means, without asking any of these questions.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid., 254.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 255.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 254.

⁷⁷ Hays, 259.

While not Hays' central criticism, this is a point worth addressing in the hopes of further substantiating Hauerwas' position. As Hays presents it, the Bible has meaning inherent within it and the means of accessing that meaning include, at least in part, participating in exegetical practices like "engag[ing] in exegetical discussion of the structure and logic of the six antitheses in Matthew 5:21-48."⁷⁸ These antitheses (from Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount") are a (re)pronouncement of the Law that then expands upon it dramatically (e.g., cutting off one's own hand for a lustful thought). They are made, in part, to pronounce a hypocrisy on the would-be pious hearers of this sermon. And while acknowledging the privileged position we hold by now having Hauerwas' commentary on Matthew—a privilege not afforded Hays, who published his work a decade prior to this commentary—we can now see precisely *how* Hauerwas would engage such texts and what role, if any, the higher criticism of the historical-critical method plays. In commenting on this part of Matthew's gospel⁷⁹ Hauerwas notes that

it is crucial that Jesus's criticisms of the Pharisees and scribes not overlook the challenge of the politics of the observance of the law. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, their rightful desire to remain holy, was their attempt to be God's faithful people even when they were in exile or occupied by a foreign power. Yet too often Israel sought to be faithful in a manner that would not challenge the powers, and in particular the power of Rome. The Pharisees quite understandably tried to observe the law without that observance being recognized as subversive to those who ruled them.

What we witness in this commentary is Hauerwas standing as a "resident alien" (as a Christian in 21st-century America) and commenting on other characters who also stood as resident aliens in their own time. His understanding of the church's experience of occupancy (and, for the Church, we can never be anything but an occupied people with no realm or land with which to return or

⁷⁸ Hays, 259.

⁷⁹ Hauerwas' commentary is not structured in a verse-by-verse or even clause-by-clause manner of many contemporary biblical commentaries, probably because he is, in his own words, he has tried to write a "commentary [that] imitates the form of commentaries common in the Middle Ages and Reformation that were moral allegories" (*Matthew*, 18). Additionally, he acknowledges, "I have not burdened the text by citing each verse. Indeed, readers may find at times that they are not sure where I am in the text, but I hope that will make their reading more interesting" (*Matthew*, 19).

retreat) is sufficient grounds for participating in the discipline of interpretation and produces an even more convicting and compelling account for its troubles. The same warning that is present in the six antitheses—warnings that are serious enough to lose body parts to—are here presented to modern reader/Christians/interpreters, and all without appeal to classic modes of historical-critical scholarship. Far from the text containing this meaning that Hauerwas has to ferret out by getting behind the text—he notes in the introduction to the commentary that “there is no ‘behind’ behind the text in the form of what either Matthew or Jesus must have been thinking, nor is there any more determinative historical explanation for what must have ‘really been going on’”⁸⁰—Hauerwas has still presented meaning in the text. He has done so, however, without reducing the text to merely containing a principle which could have been presumed prior to the reading (e.g., “don’t be a hypocrite”). And while the charge is that Hauerwas has already been formed and thus the text is reduced in its forming capacity, this criticism can just as equally—if not more forcefully—be applied to critical approaches that are “captive to an ideology alien to the politics of the church.”⁸¹ For this is, ultimately, the sin that Hauerwas seeks to avoid first and foremost, the sin that “biblical criticism seek[s] to depoliticize the interpretation of Scripture on the grounds that the text has an objective meaning.”⁸² Such depoliticization robs the Church of its values since, for Hauerwas, “Politics... names the conversation between members of a community across time, which is necessary for the discovery of values in common.”⁸³ Thus, Hauerwas presents a political reading of Scripture, but so too does the higher criticism Hays

⁸⁰ *Matthew*, 20-21.

⁸¹ Hays, 260.

⁸² *US*, 18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16.

commends. And so, “it is not an issue of whether the Bible should be read politically, but an issue of which politics should determine our reading as Christians.”⁸⁴

As noted above, Hays has a firm critique of Hauerwas’ narrative approach, but since it is grounded in Hauerwas’ perception and experience of community, it is a critique that will await that subsection of this dissertation. Until then, it is worth highlighting again that the Church has a story or narrative that it interprets as a communal discipline, which can risk disagreement and diversity since the Church is held together by a power—especially the sacraments—greater than the text itself. Historical-critical scholars like Hays, who read with Hauerwas (and all the saints of the Church), still have a role in this community, but it is a mistake to presume their specialized knowledge that supposes their ability to peer behind the text grants them any additional authority in the interpretive practice that constitutes the community called Church. Indeed, the very act of appealing to such knowledge or ability is more likely to test the eucharistic bonds that hold the community together, just as with Pharisees and scribes who seek to practice their piety without threatening occupying forces by doing so.

Narrative and the Self: Reading with Samuel Wells

Hauerwas’ practice of theological ethics has been well documented in Samuel Wells’ remarkable work, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny*.⁸⁵ While this work is comprehensive in its overview of Hauerwas’ project up to the point of its publication (1998), Wells serves this section best with his accounting of Hauerwas’ sense of narrative. Wells presents his accounting of Hauerwas’ narrative in a section that sees Hauerwas’ theological ethics shifting from character to narrative. As such, much of what he writes reflects the purposes of his own work. However, this

⁸⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁵ Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 1998).

does not detract from his presentation of—what Wells calls—both “narrative from below” and “narrative from above.” In one deft passage, Wells explains both:

Thus ‘narrative from below’ is concerned with finding that one’s life and moral experience are best understood as a narrative. This narrative is always formed in the context of one’s tradition and community, which likewise are best expressed as a narrative. The journey to ‘narrative from above’ is the identification of a normative story into which all other stories need to be grafted if they are to be truthful and faithful. ‘Narrative from below’ is chiefly concerned with expressing the character of the agent: by using narrative one can give a much more adequate description of the agent than is allowed in most moral thinking. ‘Narrative from above’ is more concerned with prescription than description: it points towards how the agent’s character can be formed and trained.⁸⁶

Narrative from below reflects Hauerwas’ engagement with Alasdair MacIntyre in which “MacIntyre sees narrative as a claim for intelligibility. Human action, to be intelligible, needs a setting, which has a history. All actions are disjointed parts of a possible narrative. Life is experienced as a story: people live in stories with beginnings and endings—births and deaths. All people find that they are characters in one another’s stories.”⁸⁷ Thus, “narrative from below” is a storied account of life, as opposed to—say—a biological, chemical, evolutionary, etc. accounting. In a way to which we have already grown accustomed, meaning is not something to be discovered, but cultivated; the story of life has no presupposed meaning only waiting to be unearthed, any more than the Scriptures have such a meaning. It is through the process of sharing a common life together as a community that lives are made intelligible.

By contrast, “story from above” does presume a God who acts in and through history in a decisive manner, calling together a people who are formed by a story larger even than the ones they have been cultivating themselves. To be a truthful story, it must be able to “cover both human growth and human failure.”⁸⁸ Wells notes that, in particular, Protestant ethics have failed

⁸⁶ Wells, 46.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

on this account. “The emphasis since Luther has been that the human being before God is always a sinner, totally dependent on God’s grace.”⁸⁹ Such a “narrative from above” does not leave room for human growth, which means that the project of ethics is rendered moot. For Hauerwas, there are “political implications of this position: it has left Protestants open to whatever has been the prevailing morality in their culture. This has frequently resulted in identifying being Christian with simply being decent.”⁹⁰ Yet in the story of God noted above—that is, in the story of Israel and Jesus—one does achieve what cannot be done if there is only a “narrative from below,” namely one “discovers oneself as one learns to place oneself in the Christian story.”⁹¹ It is, thus, from “narrative from above” that ethics is both permissible and necessary.

Wells’ categories are useful for helping Hauerwas avoid a potential pitfall in his theological ethics. Hauerwas is already clearly predisposed to “narrative from above” as it animates his overall understanding of narrative, generally. There is, for Hauerwas, a story that God is telling and that is intelligible only as people become virtuous characters amongst a broader cast of characters in that story. Yet such a position is open to the question of *who* that person is *prior* to encountering the story of God, this “narrative from above.” For the existence of a person prior to this story could also presume an ontological nature to that person that must be accounted for as they enter God’s story. By creating a dialogue between “narrative from below,” which constitutes the individual, and “narrative from above,” which then forms and reforms this character into a disciple, incongruity between origin and destination are avoided. At the same time, if all there ever is was “narrative from below,” it would be unclear how moral

⁸⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁹¹ Ibid., 46.

transformation could occur; what agent or story could penetrate the seeming relativism of storied lives.

I, especially, find this dialogic helpful given Hauerwas' predilection for what Hays termed the "symbolic world" mode of discourse in scripture. For it is possible for Hauerwas to be so enamored with this symbolic world, this "narrative from above," as to lose sight of particular, actual, concrete individuals and communities, as well as the unique histories that have formed them. As we shall see in the next section on community, it is precisely this sort of actual, empirical community—or the seeming dearth of it in Hauerwas' theological ethics—that has left him most open to criticism. For his part, Wells parlays off of Hauerwas' prior engagement with MacIntyre to demonstrate a nascent "narrative from below" that is, itself, another way of speaking about "community from below" that may relieve Hauerwas of these criticisms.

Another way to view Wells' addition to Hauerwas' sense of narrative is to, as I intimated in the title to this subsection, discover in "narrative from below" the basis for the self or the agent. Interestingly, Hauerwas begins his career with a strong assumption of the "self" or "agent," and only later sacrifices this sense of self when he recognizes how founded upon modern liberalism it is. It is the wanting of liberalism's "self" that moves Hauerwas to focus on character. Wells notes the implication of this shift when he writes "that because agents differ, ethics differs when it concerns differing agents."⁹² Yet a shift to character necessarily entails a greater focus on what forms the character of the agent and less on the agent him or herself. This is fine and well for virtue ethics, but the sense of the self's origin and location is slowly eroded in the process. However, as Wells has demonstrated, by acknowledging the importance of both

⁹² Ibid., 40.

“narratives,” this does not have to be the case. The “self” or “agent” can still be narratively construed, while also open to a character-forming story “from above.”

Narrative and Contingency

Earlier I noted how narrative is a political act, a struggling for meaning amongst a people. It is the political nature of narrative that guarantees its contingent nature. Consider, as an example, a church setting in which the wealthiest member and biggest donor to a church (for these two things do not always go hand-in-hand) pursues and pressures a congregation toward a particular course of action vis-à-vis his reading of scripture. The concern about the contingent nature of narrative would be that this man could institute any number of forms of idolatry in his local parish by dint of his economic power in that community. And this surely does happen. Yet this man’s wealth is no guarantor that he has avoided the contingent nature of narrative for maybe there exists a poor, single mother of two who pushes back against this man by reminding the community that Jesus once told a rich young ruler to sell all he had and “follow me.”⁹³ Maybe the wealthy man in this parish still gets his way—or maybe “he went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Matt. 19:22). Whatever the actual outcome, this parable—that is the one being told in this dissertation and not the one recorded in Matthew’s witness—demonstrates that all parties of a community are equally under the pressure created by the contingent nature of narrative. Such an example also reminds us that, at least when it comes to Scripture, Scripture interprets Scripture, which—in our political understanding of narrative—means that we interpret one another as we live together in community.

The contingent nature of narrative means that we are not permitted to view the Bible as a meaning-filled book that need only be opened, read, and enjoyed. The lure to view scripture

⁹³ See: Matthew 19:16-22.

thusly is understandable, because the alternative, as presented by Hauerwas, is full of contingencies, community, and potential conflict, which can become an emotional weight many are not prepared to carry. In so doing, however, the Scriptures are elevated past the very authority of God (for whom, if anything or anyone in life is not mired in contingencies, it would be God). The subsequent biblicism is not only corrosive spiritually, it also cuts off the reader from the very practice that creates communities. In this void of a communal life with other disciples, one is apt to assume a more general, blasé understanding of community—especially as provided by modern liberalism. That is, a community of ever-shrinking numbers because it is founded upon mutual agreement on a variety of topics or issues. And the number of potential members to such a community is destined for one since the character necessary to face the contingencies and conflicts of life together is not present.⁹⁴

Contingency, then, is a blessing for it is in acknowledging that we only know in part, see in part, that we are driven into a community with the hopes that, together, we might know and see better. And even if this rosier picture is forced to reckon with the less rosy aspects of such a community, Hauerwas accounts for the work of God vis-à-vis the sacraments, especially the eucharist, to hold together a people prone to repel apart. That the sacraments do this work, rather than the wit and will of the people, means that the community of interpreters that form the Scriptures and their meaning can risk the challenges of contingency, for their being together comes as a gift. In this regard, then, we can still attest that “all scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16) for it is the work of God that forms the communities that form the stories that reveal to the community their shared values and sense of the common good.

⁹⁴ It may be worth remembering that in C.S. Lewis’ allegory of heaven, hell, and purgatory—*The Great Divorce*—hell is a very lonely place where each member just moves further away from anyone with whom they do not instantly and organically agree. Hell becomes a sprawling ex-urb of self-imposed solitude.

With such an emphasis on the communal nature of narrative, it is now well time to turn to community directly.

COMMUNITY

Introduction

While community is rarely far from any of Hauerwas' works, three books in particular help chart his understanding of the nature and role of community in theological ethics—*In Good Company: The Church as Polis*; *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Social Ethic*; and *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. From the outset, one must understand that “community” is often interchangeable with “polity” and/or “politics” in Hauerwas' vocabulary. It is derived from the Greek *polis*, meaning city-state and he uses it less as an institutional word and more as a description of a people, bound in a particular place, living under particular norms, principles, and traditions. Both the church is a polis (as in the subtitle to *In Good Company*) and the world is a polis.

It is also worth noting from the beginning that the individual as agent nearly disappears in Hauerwas' discussion of the community. This, of course, makes sense to a degree. This disappearance is not an intellectual shortcoming in Hauerwas' work, rather it is an acknowledgment of how substantive the community is in forming its individuals. Even the autonomous, reasonable, free-choosing individual of Modernity is but a creation of the politics of Modernity. Such an individual couldn't exist—as they didn't in the so-called Dark Ages—without the collective, supportive agreement by the community that such a person is possible and, more so, preferable than any other person. Already, one can see how community shapes character because communities inevitably preference one sort of person (or character) over another and subsequently put into place any number of social correctives and power relations to

better form than that sort of individual. Contrary to the stated assumptions about “individual freedom” in, say, American democratic liberalism, each choosing citizen of this polity has already had certain choices about the sort of person they can/should become made for them *a priori*. For this reason, then, Hauerwas takes his eyes off of the individual and more directly observes communities and polities for the sake of understanding how they aid or debilitate the formation of an individual’s character in Christ.

As a final note to begin, it is in conversations about community where Hauerwas presents as his most polemical. To be sure, he has moments of focused, constructive discourse on the nature of the Church as a community who follows Jesus as the Messiah. However, he more often than not finds himself inevitably entrenched in the polity of his social location—the United States of America—and thus is often forced to confront, critique, and deconstruct this polity in his efforts to create imaginative and epistemological room for his more constructive analysis. In fairness to Hauerwas, to do otherwise—to attempt to ignore his own social location or act as if he is able to think/write above it—would be to either deny his central assumption about how formative the community is on the individual or to reify the very foundational assumptions of political liberalism he seeks to unseat by performing as a supposedly independent agent. Of course, we should also be quick to note that what is labeled as “polemical” is so labeled within a particular polity—typically American political discourse—and, therefore, might go by a different label under a different polity. Indeed, it may not be a stretch to re-label Hauerwas as more “prophetic” than “polemic,” if we first assume the primacy of the Christian narrative and tradition.

Community, generally understood

Community, for Hauerwas, *cannot* be generally understood. Unlike narrative, in which he dabbles in narrative theory and theology in order to help make his narrative approach intelligible, Hauerwas is very clear, very early on, that the Church “is not some ideal of community but a particular people who, like Israel, must find the way to sustain its existence generation after generation.”⁹⁵ As we will see below, one of the prime criticisms of Hauerwas is his perception of “Church” and “community,” which may very well be a result of *not* having a “generally understood” accounting of community, like he does with narrative. However, the Church’s origin in the work and will of the Holy Spirit results in an understanding of community that no sociological definition can ever quite encapsulate.

While all this is true, it does not mean that Hauerwas denies the general social nature of humanity, nor is he disinterested in “community” as it pertains to—for example—the modern nation-state. It merely means that his most theological pronouncements in his theological ethics is not undergirded nor made intelligible by a prior community theory. For it does not follow that just because humanity is social in nature that this sociability must necessarily take the form of the Church. Similarly, just because other communities exist—and even mirror the Church in many ways—it is not accurate to presume the Church is just like these other communities, but with a few idiosyncrasies. The marked difference about Hauerwas’ perception of community is the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, the Holy Spirit is a late addition to Hauerwas’ canon⁹⁶ and only comes after commentators—even friendly ones—note this need.⁹⁷ Yet it is safe to assume that the Holy Spirit was never far from Hauerwas’ presentation of the

⁹⁵ *PK*, 107.

⁹⁶ See: Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015).

⁹⁷ Even Wells, in giving some credence to Hauerwas’ detractors, acknowledges that their criticisms ring truer because Hauerwas “has not been pushed to clarify some of the more doctrinal features of his position. I believe he could and should do this by developing his description of the role of the Holy Spirit” (Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny*, 97).

Church as a unique community, but rather that a substantive and directed influence was never given to the Spirit. It may have been that Hauerwas presumed too much—that is, that he trusted readers to connect his thick descriptions of the Church, its practices, its liturgy, its sacraments, as obviously connected to the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. And so, it is prudent to not perpetuate this presumption and thus we begin with the Holy Spirit. From there, we can consider the Church, the “Marks of the Church,” some of Hauerwas’ critics whose focus typically falls on his understanding of community, a few responses to these critics, and then the contingent nature of community. One last note must be made before moving forward: the role of narrative in constructing the community, while clearly important to Hauerwas’ theological ethics, will not be featured in what follows below. This was sufficiently covered in the previous section and space is better reserved for looking at other Church-forming practices and disciplines that, while informed by narrative, are not constitutive of it.

The Holy Spirit

Hauerwas’ direct treatment of the Holy Spirit, in partnership with Will Willimon, does not begin with the Church or human community, but rather with the Trinity—that is, the community of Persons off of which the Church is modeled and through whom the Church is sustained. It is the presence of the Spirit that reveals to the Church that God is Triune. One cannot tell the story of Jesus, or the Father whom the Son reveals, without the Person and work of the Spirit. The Spirit is present in the incarnation⁹⁸, the baptism of Jesus⁹⁹, the story of Jesus’

⁹⁸ “From the very beginning the Holy Spirit had a task. In the performance of that task *the Spirit did not call attention to herself because the Spirit’s work is first and foremost to point to Jesus as the Son of the Father*. Just as the Spirit brooded over the waters at creation (Gen 1), so the fecund Spirit created at the beginning of the story is Jesus, God with us” (*HS*, 12—emphasis original).

⁹⁹ “At the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit pointed to the meaning of Jesus; we can’t figure out Jesus without the assistance of the Holy Spirit” (*HS*, 12-13). Hauerwas and Willimon also emphasize the significance that “the Spirit rests on Jesus’s body” (*HS*, 13).

ministry¹⁰⁰, and in the discipleship of Jesus' followers and the early church¹⁰¹. The Spirit also has a role in narrative—previously underdeveloped above—in the Spirit's work as "Advocate" who reminds us of all Christ taught. For Christ taught a "truth we cannot teach ourselves, truth that is not only a great mystery to us but also truth that we, in our human sin, cannot attain on our own. Therefore the advocate is a truth teller."¹⁰² This is why a Prayer for Illumination (or such a prayer by any other name) is prayed in worship before the scriptures are read and proclaimed.¹⁰³ Yet ultimately, it is the Spirit who alerts the Church that God is triune and the Spirit who drafts us into this triune life of love. This occurs when the Spirit rests on the Church just as she rested on Jesus at His baptism because the Spirit has a proclivity for bodies and "the Spirit must have a body on which the Spirit can rest. That body turns out to be called *church*."¹⁰⁴

It is because of where the Spirit chooses to rest that both, one, Hauerwas cannot speak of "community" in a general sense and, two, any accounting of the Church must first be an accounting of the Person and work of the Spirit, which is—itself—a revelation of the primary community of the Triune God. It thus follows that the character of the Spirit, as evidenced in the work and performance of the Spirit in the world, is also the character of the Church. Later we will focus on the "Marks of the Church," but now it must be stated that none of these marks are as such in general ways, for sociological reasons, or exist for any other reason than that they reflect the character of God in the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰⁰ As they write, "...just as Jesus's identity is established through the narrative of the Gospels, we know the character of the Spirit by observing how the Spirit interacts with plot and circumstance in the Gospels" (*HS*, 14).

¹⁰¹ Hauerwas and Willimon note the Spirit's continued presence whenever Jesus prayed—the Lord's Prayer, the Transfiguration, on the Mount of Olives—and this Spirit has been given to the Church to aid in prayer in the same manner. As they write, "*Prayer makes possible our very participation in God's life, and the Holy Spirit makes prayer possible*" (*HS*, 15—emphasis original).

¹⁰² *HS*, 19.

¹⁰³ Cf. *HS*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ *HS*, 31—emphasis original.

Part of that character certainly includes what, to our minds at least, would appear to be a wild, chaotic, out-of-control movement of the Spirit. That the Spirit is often compared to wind throughout Scripture is both apropos and unsurprising. It is not that the Spirit is out of control—and what could that mean for a Person of the Trinity except that the Spirit somehow lives out of loving community with the other two Persons of the Trinity?—but rather that our reception and experience of the Spirit as such is informative for the sorts of lives we must live if we are to live in the love of the Triune God. We live contingent lives, living “not by savvy, worldly wisdom, and techniques for church growth but rather live moment by moment, in every time and place, utterly dependent upon the gifts of the Spirit.”¹⁰⁵ There exists only two options for such a life—rebellion or submission—and using the Trinity as the model for the Church as community, submission is clearly instituted, for in their love for one another, each Person of the Trinity submits to the other, points to the other, reveals the other. The Church, too, then—in embracing strangers, loving and praying for enemies, and reconciling sins within its own body—also submits in love to one another. The seemingly chaotic nature of the Spirit is not an accident nor incidental to the purpose and work of the Spirit in the life of the Church as community.

One could easily continue to describe the Church vis-à-vis the Holy Spirit, but heuristically it is useful to focus on the character of the Church—recognizing as we now do that its character is but the character of the Spirit who rests on it—and so to the Church, specifically, we turn our attention, seeking to highlight and understand the “marks” or practices or disciplines that constitute the Church as the people of God.

The Church (and the World)

¹⁰⁵ *HS*, ix.

The Church exists as an antithesis to the world. Such a statement might seem to imply a dialogical, symbiotic, even parasitic, relationship with the world—wherein the Church cannot be known except in its difference from the world—but such a view would only be true if it neglects the Person and work of the Holy Spirit in the formation and sustainment of the Church. Thus, the Church’s role as antithesis to the world is only possible because the Church has been given as gift from God and not created by human conventions and contrivances. And so, it is hypothetically possible to consider the existence of the Church without the world—this “hypothetical” may be precisely what we mean when we speak of the eschaton, after all—but, in Hauerwas’ thought, it is not possible to think of the world without the Church. This is because the first task of the Church is to reveal the world to the world’s self.¹⁰⁶ If antithesis is too strong of a word, than “alternative” may be better as the Church “stands as a political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ.”¹⁰⁷ Whatever the particular language one wants to apply to Hauerwas’ perception of the Church/world divide, his main focus remains on the practices, proclamations, and witness of the Church since “No one listens to a church which speaks the same truths that can be heard anywhere other than church.”¹⁰⁸

Hauerwas, therefore, insists that the creation of the Church is also the creation of the world, in which “World names all those who have attempted to live as if their lives are their own, as if this time is under our control, as if we can secure ourselves through the power of the state, military might, or other human means, and who refuse to believe that Christ is the end of time.”¹⁰⁹ Understanding, then, the Church as the antithesis or alternative to the world means that

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *HR*, “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses,” 113.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

¹⁰⁸ *IGC*, 56.

¹⁰⁹ *HS*, 90.

the Church the Spirit founds, forms, and sustains is one that knows their lives are not their own for they received their life in Christ's baptism and when the Holy Spirit came to rest on their body; who are unafraid to live out of control because this is often just another way of saying "living in the Spirit"; who are peaceable and forgiving; and who entrust their life *and death* to the same Spirit with the authority to raise Jesus from the dead and in whom the Church trusts the same destiny awaits them. A Church so formed will not, however, be such an alternative on a merely ontological level. The ontology of the Church—its creation in the Spirit—is but prologue to its social ethics and witness. We shall turn to those in due course, but first it is important to understand the world against which the Church stands as an alternative, specifically the world of modern liberalism.

Modern liberalism is a common target in Hauerwas' theology and having now introduced the "world" in a Hauerwasian manner, it is fitting to focus on it more specifically. Hauerwas' focus on modern liberalism is a result of his social location—American (he would insist "Texan"), white, 20th- and 21st-century—and so he writes about, against, and to modern liberalism because it is the context in which he has been called as a theologian of the church. Had America been dominated by any other prevailing ideology or worldview, it seems likely that this hypothetical worldview would have been his target. As it is, we accept his focus as a reflection of when and where the Spirit birthed, adopted, baptized, and called Hauerwas.

Shortly, we will see that the Church has "marks" that identify it. The same can be said to be true in Hauerwas' writings for the world, especially democracy/Modernity/liberalism/Enlightenment. Two quotes, in particular, summarize these "marks" well. First, "Liberalism, in its many forms and versions, presupposes that society can be organized without any narrative that is commonly held to be true. As a result, it tempts us to

believe that freedom and rationality are independent of narrative—that is, we are free to the extent that we have no story. Liberalism is, therefore, particularly pernicious to the extent it prevents us from understanding how deeply we are captured by its account of existence.”¹¹⁰

This non-narrative structure presumed by liberalism is, of course, a farce. Hauerwas would insist that we recognize the narrative underpinnings of liberalism without which claims about “freedom” and the like would be unintelligible. Yet the conundrum which liberalism finds itself in is that of owning a particular set of beliefs while trying to make one of those beliefs the freedom of belief. Many an American Christian falls into this conundrum whenever and wherever, for example, a church maintains a nationalistic posture (even as mundane of one as keeping an American flag in the sanctuary) under the premise that the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights is what grants that church the opportunity to assemble for worship. Such a posture, typically unconsciously assumed, means that the Bill of Rights becomes the *a priori* belief of that church, prior to its own narrative, tradition, and theology—to say nothing of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit which, as we’ve seen, is who actually gathers the people of God together for the worship of God. Hauerwas seems loathe to permit Christians the opportunity to accept something like the Bill of Rights at the origin of their gathering, only to immediately dismiss it in order to get to the point of worship. For Hauerwas, in many regards, the point of worship is found in the call to worship; if that call comes from liberalism, then the Church is merely an extension of that liberalism, but if that call comes from the Person and work of the Holy Spirit in holy communion with the Triune God, then the nature, purpose, and destiny of the Church extends in a radically different direction. The primary difference is that liberalism seeks to create

¹¹⁰ HR, “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses,” 114.

and sustain the individual, while God creates and sustains communities, which is a point nicely made in the second important quotation:

The primary entity of democracy is the individual, the individual for whom society exists mainly to assist assertions of individuality. Society is formed to supply our needs, no matter the content of those needs. Rather than helping us to judge our needs, to have the right needs which we exercise in right ways, our society becomes a vast supermarket of desire under the assumption that if we are free enough to assert and to choose whatever we want we can defer eternally the question of what needs are worth having and on what basis right choices are made. What we call 'freedom' becomes the tyranny of our own desires.¹¹¹

When the individual is made the locus of existence, ethics, even reality, then the God who is a community and who forms a community in God's likeness cannot help but be challenged.

One should also note the fine point Hauerwas puts in this quote, namely that "society exists mainly to assist assertions of individuality." In this, he does not deny that modern liberalism lacks a sense of community ("society") or even a community ethic ("assist"), but rather that such a community ethic is unfounded in the Church's narrative and practices. We glimpse aspects of the Church's ethic when Hauerwas writes about "helping us to judge our needs" or having the "right needs." *This* is more in line with the work of the Church and it is precisely this that liberalism fails so mightily at. As a result, liberalism creates a "free" person who can only look within themselves, discover their own desires, and then presume that society exists (as "a vast supermarket") to help fulfill these desires. Most importantly, though, is the fact that the Church has not resisted the lure of liberalism, but rather has swallowed it like a sacrament. As a result, the Church becomes malformed, a place where individuals come to sate some particular desire, and from which they are free to leave or flee if the Church cannot meet those desires.

¹¹¹ RA, 32.

The problems of unmediated desires foisted upon individuals through the presumptions of liberalism are a particular challenge for clergy in the Church, and especially for their work of “pastoral care.” In a recent *Christian Century* article, long-time friends William H. Willimon and Hauerwas reflected on pastoral care during this pandemic. Hauerwas’ critique of the Church captured by liberalism is demonstrated well when he says, “I have little sympathy for clergy who present themselves as a member of the ‘helping professions.’ Such pastors are using people in pain to legitimate their ministry. Pastoral care has become so important because it’s the last socially approved activity of pastors.”¹¹² It is harsh to hear Hauerwas describe pastors as “using people in pain to legitimate their ministry”—and, indeed, could quickly turn off any reader, especially the pastors—unless we understand that these pastors are themselves victims to the assumptions of liberalism. This example is provided to demonstrate just one of the many, many ways in which modern, Enlightenment liberalism has captured the imaginations of clergy and churches alike. When reading Hauerwas, then, it is best to take him as a liberator, seeking to follow the same Christ who came to set captive free.

Further, Hauerwas’ identification of modern liberalism as a captor of the church makes more sense when it is acknowledged that liberalism, especially via American representative democracy, has achieved what the Church has been called to be and do—and with the church’s historic help, even—and as a result, the Church has lost sight of its mission. This is at any rate, the sense given when Hauerwas writes, “We have almost forgotten that the church is also a polity that at one time had the confidence to encourage in its members virtues sufficient to sustain their role as citizens in a society whose purpose was to counter the unwarranted claims

¹¹² William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, “The Dangers of Providing Pastoral Care,” *The Christian Century*, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/dangers-providing-pastoral-care?fbclid=IwAR2R0Gl6yawqD66zx9EYt0uzt2FkOxmPCyJQLu_65qZVuOhQty6tLi2QA5Y (accessed July 29, 2021).

made by other societies and states.”¹¹³ Liberalism creates Christians’ sense of identity and purpose—so perfectly illustrated in reframing pastors as serving in “a helping profession”—in a way that the Church *should* be cultivating Christians’ sense of identity and purpose.

“The church is also a polity” is Hauerwas’ way of railing against the Modern assumption of the separation of church and state, in which the former is a proclivity, and the latter is a polity. Hauerwas’ theological ethics seeks to retrieve and reintegrate a sense of the church as a polity, a community (of character), with a unique narrative, and the Person and work of the Holy Spirit undergirding and guiding it all. And while presenting the Church and liberalism as two competing polities would insinuate civil war (or, at least, the ingredients for it), we must remember—and also, better understand why—Hauerwas is an avowed pacifist. The Church’s polity, or the Church as a polity, may very well need to uproot and overthrow any competing polities, but it does so through its nonviolent practices and disciplines. It is to these practices and disciplines—these marks—that we must then turn.

“Marks of the Church”

The “marks of the Church” is a theme prevalent in Hauerwas’ writings since at least the time of his early publication of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, in which he writes, “...there are clear ‘marks’ through which we know that the church is church. These marks do not guarantee the existence of the church but are the means that God has given us to help us along the way. Thus, the church is known there the sacraments are celebrated, the word is preached, and upright lives are encouraged and lived.”¹¹⁴ Sacraments will remain a central part of Hauerwas’ understanding of the marks of the church, while “preaching” and “upright lives” will be subsumed into his broader understanding of the church’s liturgy. That preaching fits in liturgy makes sense enough,

¹¹³ *CC*, 73-74.

¹¹⁴ *PK*, 107.

but the move to nest upright lives (or, in other terms, sanctification) in liturgy is a later move by Hauerwas, and one that will demand special attention.¹¹⁵ These “marks” are the practices of the church, which are so important because “Practices make the church the embodiment of Christ for the world.”¹¹⁶ Therefore, the Church “sees itself as a gift of God to the world.”¹¹⁷

While that last quotation comes from *In Good Company* (1995) and would seem to reduce the Church to its mere functionality, the lessons we learned about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit—how the Spirit must rest on bodies and has made the Church, as the Body of Christ, the body of such rest—helps us better understand (indeed, may help Hauerwas better understand) why practices are so thoroughly theological. It is through the Church’s faithful practices that it presents itself as it is, namely as the Body of Christ, and therefore is able to be rested upon by the Holy Spirit, which is done for the sake of the world. For it is in performing these marks that “the world is known and given a history.”¹¹⁸ Given, especially, Modern liberalism’s non-narrative presumptions, giving the world a history, a narrative, is a great gift indeed and one that occurs as the church embodies its practices.

While many different practices are presented, we do well to follow Hauerwas’ broad liturgical approach that begins and centers his theological ethics in the Eucharist.¹¹⁹ Since the Eucharist is most typically celebrated in the midst of public worship, it serves as an easy metonym by which to address the entirety of the liturgical Christian worship of God.

This liturgically centered approach originates in an early work by Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, but finds its fullest expression in his edited work (alongside Samuel Wells), *The*

¹¹⁵ See: *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*.

¹¹⁶ *IGC*, 67-68.

¹¹⁷ *BCCE*, 21.

¹¹⁸ *IGC*, 33

¹¹⁹ Cf. *BCCE*, 3.

Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics. Whereas other works comparable to the *Blackwell Companion* might start with some basic introductory remarks about what Christian ethics is and how it is done, then pivot to a series of essays on topical issues, Hauerwas and Wells center the entire work around the liturgical movements of a worship service—from gathering to sending—and, in this, address discrete “issues” or topics in ethics. Together they labor to explain that the segregation of Christian ethics from Christian worship has done more to harm the Church’s witness than sustain it, and that such a move is the result of imbibing and reifying a number of Modernist assumptions.

They innumerate four distinctions between those taught by Modernist assumptions and their own approach: Ethics is about the real, while worship is about the unreal;¹²⁰ ethics is about the objective, whereas worship is subjective;¹²¹ ethics is about the external, while worship is about the internal;¹²² and ethics is about actions, worship about words.¹²³ In response, they insist that what Modernity might label as “unreal” (or “play”) is precisely real because the “authors believe that, contrary to the popular slogan, life *is* a rehearsal.”¹²⁴ Such a view is only possible, of course, because God has gifted the world time—both a beginning and an ending—and that worship participates in the end by rehearsing for it. Once such a view is established, the other binaries breakdown. The subjectivity of worship, focused as it is on beauty, cannot be divorced from the objective, focused as it is on truth or goodness. That such a break is even present is a result “of the foundations of modern liberal-democratic culture that this detachment is not only possible, but is also necessary, if peoples with diverging and even contradictory perceptions of

¹²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²² Cf. *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

goodness, truth, and beauty are to live among one another without violent conflict.”¹²⁵ Similarly, the public/private divide dissolves in the waters of baptism because “in baptism, Christians... are called to give up any sense that they ‘own’ their bodies. So the notion of ‘private’ makes no sense.”¹²⁶ Finally, words and actions are reunited in harmony as the Church’s worship acknowledges that it’s future is found in its remembering and enacting the past acts of God in Jesus of Nazareth, while entrusting itself to the Holy Spirit in the present, and hoping in the aforementioned future promised by God. Worship is enacted in the liturgy—a word, we should be quick to remember, that derives from the Greek and literally means “the work of the people.” Thus, at times, Modernist assumptions impeded theological truth and, at other times, misunderstands the counter polity that is the Church as it views and mediates the Church through its own broken assumptions. Challenging and correcting, then, are the twin works of liturgically informed Christian ethics. And, in returning to the major theme of this section, none of this is possible for mere individuals, but is the work of the Church as a community—a community created by the Holy Spirit, embodied in its practices, and known through its “marks.”

The Eucharist is central to the worship of God because, contrary the Modernist assumption that time is a linear series of discrete events, it “is the principal way in which Christians bind time.”¹²⁷ It does this in the very nature of its performance, as it must be done corporately and requires preparation—both spiritual and logistical—and thereby redefines time as “an ebb and flow, a constant sending out to love and serve and share, a constant return and gathering to praise and repent and ask.”¹²⁸ It must also take place in a particular space, which makes the Church a visible people, a distinct community with a distinct polity apart from the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 19.

world.¹²⁹ Such a practice allows “the church to be a ‘contrast model’ for all polities that know not God.”¹³⁰ It was noted above that “No one listens to a church which speaks the same truths that can be heard anywhere other than church.”¹³¹ It is, therefore, through the Eucharist and liturgy of the Church that new truths can be heard, which is the Church’s act of witness to the world.

Criticisms of Hauerwas’ View of Community

Given the polemic (or prophetic) nature of Hauerwas’ work, it is not surprising that he is met by resistance. This resistance, tragically, is more apt to come from *within* the Church than beyond it, which for Hauerwas is just further evidence that while the Church may have helped form the Modern world, Modernity is now returning the favor. Three critics, especially, are worth noting (in chronological order)—James Gustafson, Richard B. Hays, and Nicolas Healy—not only for their attention to detail in Hauerwas’ work, but also because in their refutation, Hauerwas’ understanding of community is made more intelligible.

In 1985, James Gustafson provided the first substantive critique of his former doctoral student’s theological ethics in his essay, “The Sectarian Temptation,” presented at the Catholic Theological Society of America. While “sectarian” is his stated critique, he also works in accusations of “tribalism” and “fideism.” Hauerwas has his response,¹³² but for the sake of hearing Gustafson’s critique in the hope of better learning Hauerwas’ sense of community, this response will be ignored. Others, later, will take up the cause for Hauerwas sufficiently enough.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³⁰ *CC*, 84.

¹³¹ *IGC*, 56.

¹³² See: Stanley Hauerwas, “Why the ‘Sectarian Temptation’ Is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson” (1988), *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 90-110.

Gustafson’s critique is framed in three ways: sociological, philosophical, and theological. For our current discussion, the sociological is most important and about which Gustafson writes, “Theologians who succumb to the sectarian temptation assume, *sociologically*, that the Church or the Christian community is socially and culturally isolable from the wider society and culture of which it is a part. They assume that there is, or can be, a kind of Christian tribe living in a kind of ghetto whose members are (or can be) shaped in their inner dispositions, their religious passions and their moral outlooks almost exclusively by the biblical or Christian language or narratives.”¹³³ For Gustafson, this serves as his critique that Hauerwas (and others like him, for the essay is targeted at a general movement more than the man) as employing “tribalism.” It is easy to see why one of Hauerwas’ next published book after this essay is *Resident Aliens*, in which he and William H. Willimon refute the “ghetto” or “tribal” metaphor in favor of one in which Christians *are* clearly members of a broader society, but who must—of necessity and faithfulness—live differently, display different “marks,” from that broader society. One of Gustafson’s problems in this essay is that he gets trapped in his own (damning) metaphor of “ghetto” or “tribe,” leaving him insensitive to the biblical metaphor of “resident alien.” Indeed, he almost appear obtuse to the realities of much of the recorded Jewish history in the Old Testament, the vast majority of which takes place with Israel decentered and displaced; that is, with Israel living as resident aliens.

For all of Gustafson’s talk of a “doctrine of revelation in the Bible”¹³⁴ and “the historic doctrine of creation,”¹³⁵ his critique runs thin on actual biblical or narrative justification. Such omission is not noted here to imply a lack of piety on his part, but rather as implicit evidence that

¹³³ Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation,” 90—emphasis original.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

another narrative—the narrative of Modern liberalism—is fully present and fully functioning in the background of all he writes. In an ironic twist, Hauerwas’ story-mediated sense of community demonstrates that it is Gustafson who lives in the “ghetto” of Modernity, captured and imprisoned by the “tribe” of liberalism. Gustafson swings his biggest blow to this Hauerwasian approach when he writes, “The sociological assumption also breaks on the rocks of the fact that Christians do (and ought to) participate in their professions, their political communities and other aspects of the social order. Their moral lives are not confined to some Christian community; they take place where choices have to be made that are not only moral but economic, political, medical, and so forth.”¹³⁶ At no point in Hauerwas’ vast corpus (both prior to and after Gustafson’s critique) has he ever insinuated that Christians live anywhere other than in God’s creation, the world. His work has been, rather, to demonstrate the ways in which they live differently in this environment. As such, he readily acknowledges that Christians’ “moral lives are not confined to some Christian community.”

The challenge in Gustafson’s essay is that he fails to note how these various communities—political, economic, social—not only present themselves to the world, *but also* how they view and approach one another based upon their self-appraisal. For example, an economic view of the self, at least in a capitalist society, is that of laborer/consumer—one labors in a profession or job in order to earn the funds necessary to consume what one desires. The church, then, when viewed through this “laborer/consumer” lens becomes its own spiritual or religious marketplace wherein a Christian disciple labors in the church (through volunteering or the liturgy—a word that literally means “the work of the people”) and receives some sort of spiritual or religious product to consume. However, the church is not likely to present itself in

¹³⁶ Ibid., 91.

these same terms. It would likely reframe “labor” as “service” or even more basically “discipleship” and would equally reframe “consume” as “receive” or “blessing.” Simply put, the functional quid pro quo in a capitalist economic system would not be the way the church would present itself. Most generously approached, Gustafson could be claiming that each of these communities lay claim to a particular subset of life without infringing upon one another. That, however, cannot be empirically demonstrate through any survey of Christian history, or even present Christian sociology. Instead, it is apparent that each of these communities attempt to lay claim to—even make captive—the other communities. Hauerwas’ claim, then, is that Christianity has been made captive to modern liberalism, especially in terms of modern capitalism and modern representative democracy. The charter and the character of these other communities try to impinge upon the Church’s sense of identity and purpose. Of course, whether any of these communities know that these other communities are committing this act of capturing is an open question.

What may have served Gustafson better as he prepared this critique was to read Hauerwas’ 1974 essay with David B. Burrell, “Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer’s *Inside the Third Reich*.”¹³⁷ It is impossible to claim that Gustafson, himself, is suffering from self-deception. Rather, this essay provides a framework for coming to recognize the ways that, for example, modern economics can attempt—even unknowingly or implicitly—to take the Church captive. And so, the “self-deception” in this essay is not directed toward Gustafson, but toward the Church (though, of course, Gustafson is part of the Church, so it may apply to him as well). In this essay, Hauerwas claims that “our ability to know what we are up to

¹³⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, “Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer’s *Inside the Third Reich*, with David B. Burrell,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 200-220.

and live authentically depends on our capacity to avoid self-deception. We cannot hope to avoid an inveterate tendency to self-deception, however, unless we work at developing the skills required to articulate the shape of our individual and social engagements, or forms of life.”¹³⁸ That self-deception is “inveterate,” or a well-established habit that is unlikely to change, is a result of the Church, as a story-formed community, being steeped in the presumptions of Modern liberalism. A glimpse ahead to the next section on Character can already be seen in Hauerwas’ insistence on “developing... skills,” but for now it is important to note the distinction this implies between Gustafson’s appraisal of Hauerwas and Hauerwas’ theological ethics. Gustafson regards Hauerwas as writing and describing the Christian community as community *qua* community. Hauerwas’ approach is much different. For Hauerwas, the community exists as a story-formed people whose work of interpreting and reinterpreting their story makes them a “body” upon which the Holy Spirit rests and through whom the Church is empowered to display the “marks” that set it apart from “the world,” which simultaneously reveals the world to the world’s self. At the outset, I noted that Hauerwas does not have a pre-formed sense of community to which he applies the Church because the Church is *performed*, not pre-formed in theory. There is no community *qua* community, as Gustafson implies, and attempts to press such a claim on Hauerwas’ work results in mislabeling it “sectarian,” “tribal,” and “fideistic.”¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ibid., 200.

¹³⁹ For another good defense of Hauerwas against Gustafson’s claims, see: Nigel Biggar, “Is Stanley Hauerwas Sectarian?” in *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, eds. Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 141-160. Contrary to Gustafson, who presents Karl Barth as part of a “confessional” theology more akin to his own thinking (and cites, as well, the Niebuhrs in the process), Biggar asserts that Hauerwas is “far more Barthian than Pietist” (143) and that “Barth calls for polemics rather than apologetics, insisting that theology must let God’s self-revelation grasp human language, and not language revelation” (147). Biggar’s essay helps demonstrate that Hauerwas’ work is often contested because of his reappraisal of recent theological masters (like Barth and the Niebuhrs) as much as for its constructive content. That is to say, there are theological layers at work in both Hauerwas’ writing and the critiques of these writings.

A similar, though maybe qualitatively better, critique of Hauerwas' understanding of community is offered by Hays, who we previously reviewed in the Narrative section above. Hays' biggest critique of Hauerwas, however, was not just Hauerwas' questionable (to Hays) hermeneutic, but is ultimately about community, specifically the lack of a concrete community in Hauerwas' own life. He does so by citing Hauerwas' own ecclesial confession worth quoting at length here:

...it is not clear from which church or tradition I write or for what church or group I write. I am, after all a (Southern) Methodist of doubtful theological background (when you are a Methodist it goes without saying you have a doubtful theological background); who teaches and worships with and is sustained morally and financially by Roman Catholics; who believes that the most nearly faithful form of Christian witness is best exemplified by the often unjustly ignored people called anabaptists or Mennonites. In short my ecclesial preference is to be a high-church Mennonite. It is no wonder that some find it hard to pin down my position.¹⁴⁰

Hays rightly reads Hauerwas' theology as highly pragmatic or performative, which means that Hauerwas' poor performance of it is no mere ad hominem critique, but a viable means of evaluation. According to Hays, for Hauerwas, the most troubling performance is his preaching—first at the York Chapel at Duke University and then routinely at various churches, weddings, and the like—because it is unclear under what authority he performs these sermons.¹⁴¹ Hays punctuates this problem by noting that “He cannot appeal to the authority of the New Testament, because his theoretical program insists that the authority of the New Testament is mediated only through a traditioned community to whose traditions he chooses not to submit.”¹⁴² As a result, “Hauerwas's hermeneutical position comes unraveled in the midst of the pragmatic task that he deems essential for the intelligibility of Christian ethics.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ *CC*, 6.

¹⁴¹ As Hays writes, “When challenged by friends to explain by what authority he, as an unordained person, preaches, he can only say, ‘I wish I had a good response to that troubling question.’” (Hays, 265.)

¹⁴² Hays, 265.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 265.

Is Hauerwas undone in his own performance? Does acknowledging and accepting that Hauerwas is a sinner like any other Christian retrieve any aspect of his ecclesiology; that is, could his personal, poor performance still be permitted without it having to undermine his theological ethics? Hays' critique is serious and should be seriously taken. It encounters Hauerwas' understanding of Church and community on its own terms and finds Hauerwas to be poorly performing in those terms. At the same time, it acknowledges that Hauerwas has made and is still making meaningful contributions to the Church. In a manner, it is not merely Hauerwas' failings, which can be brought to the Cross from justification, that critique his theological ethics, but rather his successes. How can a man, standing outside of any particular, concrete tradition, demand that Christian ethics can only be done within a particular tradition? There are two responses worth considering to this critique—one practical, the other theological.

Practically speaking, it is unlikely that Hauerwas *has* preached outside of a particular, concrete tradition. For example, and using my own parish setting in a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) church, it is the congregationally elected Session of Elders who determines who preaches from the pulpit every Sunday. By dint of my own ordination and installation as the pastor of the church, the presumption is routinely made that this duty will be mine. However, on those weeks when I am away (for example, on sabbatical writing a dissertation), the “pulpit supply” is determined by a vote of the Session for each Sunday. Once that vote is made, regardless of who is preaching or their ordination status, the authority of the pulpit is conferred upon them. They are the preacher.¹⁴⁴ While each denomination has its own polity for adjudicating pulpit opportunity and authority, we do well to take it on trust that any context in

¹⁴⁴ It is worth pausing to note here that should Prof. Hauerwas ever desire to preach at First Presbyterian Church, Marysville (OH), I will strongly encourage the Session of the church to confer these privileges to him. He may consider this a standing offer.

which Hauerwas has preached was done so under the authority of some church, even if not under a particular denomination. That is to say, Hays has potentially misread the ecclesial realities of many (most?) Protestant churches in the United States, in which local control and local option has grown in authority over the last half of the twentieth and earliest decades of the twenty-first centuries. While ignorant to the finer points of Methodist polity, for example, I would assume that Duke University—to the degree that it is still a denominationally-affiliated university with the United Methodist Church—must share its life with that denomination, be that sharing economic, liturgical, and/or political. As such, any worship that occurs within its chapel has been authorized by the denomination/tradition, even as that authorization is mediated through a particular person or committee (such as a Dean of Chapel) that maintains accountability to a particular bishop or superintendent. All this to say, Hays’ critique does not pass muster with ecclesial realities.

But this critique is less concerning—I mean, who can be ashamed of not understanding all the nuances of denominational polity except those who are tasked with maintaining it?—than the theological lapse in Hays’ critique. Using Hays’ own conceit of scripture’s four-fold modes of appeal—rules, principles, paradigms, and symbolic world—we must acknowledge that Hauerwas’ eschatologically-oriented work rests primarily in “symbolic world.” For Hauerwas, Jesus’ preaching on the Kingdom of God creates truthful “perceptual categories through which we interpret reality.”¹⁴⁵ To be sure, the existence of historic traditions and denominations are one manifestation of such perceptual categories but should not be regarded as an exhaustive manifestation of them. Such traditions and denominations do exist to proclaim and perform this Kingdom of God, but that does not mean that there exists no space outside traditions or

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 209.

denominations—or, more pertinently to Hauerwas’ theological ethics, in the overlap and interplay *between* these traditions or denominations—with which to proclaim and perform. Once interplay is accepted, Hauerwas’ “high-church Mennonite” status is less a deficit and more an asset. It is the cultivation of a new space between and amongst concrete, practical traditions for the purposes of proclamation. And such space is available because scripture routinely presents the Church with a symbolic world, full of perceptual categories, and thus entices the Church to near-limitless play within the bounds of faithfulness. To claim otherwise is to claim that the Church is a completed entity, a static entity. Such an entity could not witness to the Kingdom of God for the simple fact that this Kingdom is still in advent. A settled church cannot testify to an emerging Kingdom. Hays’ failure to take seriously the symbolic world mode of appeal in scripture results in his stunted evaluation of the concrete, practical church today—a church whose performance must also embody this symbolic world, just as much as it must embody the rules, principles, and paradigms of scripture, if it is to remain faithful. Reformation is not only possible; it is inevitable. And while Hauerwas may stand outside a concrete, practical tradition at the moment, it is not impossible to imagine that as the Church stays in conversation—remembering, of course, that the Church is an interpretive community—with the theological ethics of Hauerwas that it might be molded and transformed into new manifestations, manifestations that might even fully encapsulate a “high-church Mennonite.” For, in the end, we currently live in a world in which one major tradition is named after its originator—the *Lutherans*—even as Luther, himself, had to step outside of the concrete, practical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. To Roman Catholics, this act may yet remain a condemnable heresy, but if one can accept Luther’s contributions to the faithfulness of the Church, even as he once

held a tenuous social location like Hauerwas, then there is conceptual space to permit Hauerwas to still contribute without reviling or rejecting his work.

I have oft referred to Hauerwas in prophetic terms and this may yet be another example of this, for the prophets were often outside the concrete tradition of the practiced Judaism of their day (and all the more so when these practices were idolatrous), but still spoke (“preached”) and performed acts of faithfulness for the benefit of the community of God. The Holy Spirit still rested upon them. That they, or their words, are later canonized as Scripture is evidence enough that the people of God can—and must—remain in conversation with even those who do not maintain official standing. Or, put differently, as the community of God performs its interpretive task over the course of time, the very definition of “official standing” is apt to change. Kings may be decentered in favor of prophets; the powerful may be brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up,¹⁴⁶ which is an eschatological vision presented as a “symbolic world” mode of appeal. Taking this mode of appeal seriously creates space for Hauerwas to exist in the in-between spaces of the traditions he both celebrates and critiques.

After Gustafson’s (1985) and Hays’ (1995) critique of Hauerwas, there was a seeming two-decade moratorium on such pursuits. Maybe it was Hauerwas’ award of *Time* magazine’s choice for America’s Best Theologian in 2001 or, more likely, the esteem conferred upon his work by his selection to deliver the Gifford Lectures in that same year, but while essays were still written about him, the tenure of the critique lessened, and additional works of praise and acclaim were presented. For those firmly and knowingly entrenched in more Modernist, liberal traditions of doing theology, there may have been no love lost, but the disputes had largely been settled to the degree that firm lines of demarcation were now established and known. All this

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Luke 1:52.

changed with the publication of Nicholas M. Healy's *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*.¹⁴⁷ This work shall be the last we consider in the critiques of Hauerwas' understanding of community.

Healy begins, in many ways, where Hays left off. One does not have to travel very far into his work before coming across questions about Hauerwas' ecclesial identity and location. While not desiring to retread old paths, Healy—the first Roman Catholic commentator cited in this essay to respond to Hauerwas—does add a unique layer worth considering. As he writes,

...while Hauerwas's Christianity is clearly the product of his background to some degree, it is also very much his own, so much so that he cannot be made to fit within any particular church tradition. In this he perhaps reflects a more general trend in contemporary church culture in which denominational differences are played down in favor of a broader orthodoxy, though his strong emphasis upon certain aspects of Methodism and his appropriation of themes from the Radical Reformation tradition suggest that this may not be quite the case. But he does borrow material from all over. One example of this, as we will see, is Hauerwas's admiration for a now largely bygone form of Roman Catholicism in which the clergy led and formed an obedient and passive laity, yet he avoids living under anything like that kind of authority himself.¹⁴⁸

Of course, the first response is to note that Healy, a Roman Catholic, does not explain why there exists “a now largely bygone form” of that Roman Catholic tradition, an exercise that might cause him to acknowledge his own tradition's deep affinity with Modernity. Indeed, Hauerwas makes just such a critique in his essay, “Not Late Enough: The Divided Mind of *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*,”¹⁴⁹ in which Hauerwas confronts the Modern humanism that undergirds this Catholic encyclical. This critique notwithstanding, though, the point is made that Hauerwas envisions an ideal church, though that is not necessarily the same thing as writing to and for only this ideal. It should be noted, though, that nothing in Hauerwas' theological ethics

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

¹⁴⁸ Healy, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 109-116.

would presuppose “an obedient and passive laity” as part of his ideal community. Hauerwas’ theological ethics requires far too much interpretive participation of the laity for “passive” to ever apply. Indeed, it is not clear at all whether Healy’s description is an accurate accounting of this “largely bygone form of Roman Catholicism.” Healy does not substantiate this claim that Roman Catholicism ever suffered from “passive laity” itself. In fact, the broad acculturation of various indigenous traditions and lore into Catholic teaching and liturgy, an inevitable aspect of Roman Catholicism being a global communion, would imply that the laity are often active in creating the liturgies and worship practices of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵⁰ Ultimately, Healy’s assertion of “an obedient and passive laity” presumes monodirectional power relations—that is, clerical imposition on lay life—which, even if it exists, cannot be assumed to be Hauerwas’ understanding of the inter-ecclesial power relations.

The heart of Healy’s critique, however, is that the subject of theological inquiry—God—has been displaced by the Church in Hauerwas’ theological ethics. He compares Hauerwas with Friedrich Schleiermacher in this regard, understanding Schleiermacher as pursuing a “relation of doctrine, [in which] theology can talk about God only *after* it talks or *as* it talks about the church. Christian doctrine is modified and arguably distorted as a result.”¹⁵¹ Healy makes the claim that Hauerwas essentially falls into this same pattern, albeit with a shift in focus from Schleiermacher’s individual self and consciousness to Hauerwas’ own emphasis on the community of the Church. Thus, it is fair to read this critique as more than applicable to Hauerwas as well. Yet such a critique, as we noted above in the section on the Holy Spirit, does

¹⁵⁰ The RCC’s acculturation of the Hispanic *Día de los Muertos* might serve as an example of this, though even this history is contested as to whether or not Western/Catholic traditions of “All Saints Day” created this tradition or if this tradition pre-existed western influences. Regardless of the specifics in this debate, we can still rightly question Healy’s assertion that Roman Catholicism ever had “passive” laity—or, put differently, shift the burden of proof back onto Healy to demonstrate the actual existence of such laity.

¹⁵¹ Healy, 48.

not hold in Hauerwas' theological ethics. *The Holy Spirit* demonstrates Hauerwas' firm commitment to talking about God as the subject of his theology first and foremost, and then the Church only as a related, integrated secondary topic.

Beyond an issue of mere timing, there is a broader assumption at work in Healy's critique, namely that God can be addressed apart from God's concrete work in human history. Seemingly simmering beneath the surface is the age-old debate about natural law and divine revelation. To be sure, Hauerwas is no fan of natural law. Even his published Gifford Lectures, *With the Grain of the Universe*, which sounds like a natural law title, is its own tongue-in-cheek, Christocentric inversion. The title, a phrase borrowed from a John Howard Yoder essay, understands "grain" not in terms of the natural direction of something (e.g., wood), but rather as the seed of wheat that falls to the ground (a death metaphor) and creates new life. For Hauerwas, Jesus of Nazareth is this "grain", and the Church is called to go "with the grain of the universe." As he writes, "the God we worship and the world God created cannot be truthfully known without the cross, which is why the knowledge of God and ecclesiology—on the politics called church—are interdependent."¹⁵² Yet it is worth questioning whether it is Hauerwas' understanding of natural law that better systematizes with divine revelation than the one only implied, never stated, by Healy. For Hauerwas does have a working definition of natural law, which he receives from Karl Barth, in which natural law or natural theology describes "the attempt to witness to the nongodforsakenness of the world even under the conditions of sin."¹⁵³ While *The Holy Spirit* is published after Healy's work, *With the Grain of the Universe* was

¹⁵² *WGU*, 17.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20.

readily available to him and would appear to assuage some of his concerns if it were more thoroughly engaged.¹⁵⁴

The trouble with Healy's critique of Hauerwas isn't that it is off-base—there are only a few instances where Healy's description of Hauerwas' work runs thin or seems skewed—but rather that it is unclear why Hauerwas' work is theologically problematic. Healy desires Hauerwas to talk about God in a manner that Hauerwas is unprepared to do so for reasons he routinely articulates. In response, Healy more asserts the problem than explains it. This critique of Healy generally holds true through his work with the exception of his fourth chapter on the “empirical church,” which is how he distinguishes the Church from its theological understanding. A helpful heuristic might be to regard this chapter as Healy's attempt to focus more on *praxis* than theory.

For Healy, the empirical church is comprised of “saints and disciples, as well as the more unsatisfactory: admirers, hangers-on, and those barely there.”¹⁵⁵ All, by dint of their baptism, can rightly be called members, but for Healy, the manner in which Hauerwas demands a high level of Christian performance in order to be part of the church means that “this very mixed membership raises questions about Hauerwas's argument.”¹⁵⁶ Essentially, Healy argues that because Hauerwas has constructed the Church as a contrastive model to the world, enough Christians in each church and enough churches in the world would have to live in this manner in order for the Church to be as Hauerwas has described it. Healy is suspicious that this is the case.¹⁵⁷ Part of Healy's mistake here is reading “visible” as meaning “extraordinary.” Small, ordinary acts—like

¹⁵⁴ I can find only one reference to *With the Grain of the Universe* in Healy's work (page 75) and is given in the context of comparing and contrasting Hauerwas and Barth's differing understandings of “creation.” It is interesting that Healy focuses in on Hauerwas' understanding of creation, as this was a theme also noted by Gustafson above. Indeed, there is likely more scholarly work needed both by and on Hauerwas and creation.

¹⁵⁵ Healy, 79.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵⁷ *Cf. Ibid.*, 80-83.

eating a little bread and drinking a little juice—can be theologically deep and penetratingly visible. The problem, of course, is that to an untrained eye, a wafer and cup look merely like a wafer and cup—not the body and blood of the Christ. Yet that training is necessary for the Church to be truly visible is not a problem for Hauerwas, but rather an opportunity. It is the opportunity for the untrained to come within the community, learn their story, be initiated in their practices, and slowly have their character transformed to display the marks of God at work in the world. In short, it is an opportunity for those who are outside the Church to become Church. That God has chosen to do this in relatively ordinary ways—the incarnation of Jesus himself should be read less for its more mysterious elements (e.g., virgin birth) and more for its privileging of the ordinary (e.g., God deigning to become human in order to reset the course of human history)—is first and foremost God’s prerogative and secondarily, then, a model by which the contrastive Church will mark its contrasts with the world. As Hauerwas writes, “God gives his people everything they need to follow him. In the context of contemporary Christian ethics, this claim may seem incomprehensible, bewildering, and absurd.”¹⁵⁸ Healy, it would appear, would be amongst those described as “contemporary Christian ethics.”

At the outset of this subsection on critics of Hauerwas, I noted that the purpose was less about validating or invalidating Hauerwas’ theological ethics—for, surely, if they had been invalidated, then choosing him as central to this essay would be foolhardy at best—and more about allowing the criticisms to open up broader understandings of Hauerwas’ theological ethics. As we conclude this subsection, then, it is worth summarizing the lessons learned. Gustafson’s critique of “sectarian,” “tribal,” and “fideistic” is met by Hauerwas’ retrieval of the biblical metaphor of “resident alien,” which is an important way of articulating who the Church is *and*

¹⁵⁸ *BCCE*, 13.

what it does. He also, through his own potential self-deception, helps us see the temptation to and problems resulting from this act. Finally, a greater emphasis on performance of the community, rather than the pre-formed community, is noted. Hays' criticism allows Hauerwas to better articulate the varieties of Christian life and authority, especially as it is found in differing denominations and traditions in contemporary America. More importantly, Hauerwas' emphasis on the "symbolic world" mode of appeal from scripture comes through as part of his eschatologically-mediated theological ethics. Finally, Healy—in direct contrast to his greatest criticism of Hauerwas—allows Hauerwas to demonstrate just how truly and thoroughly theocentric his ecclesiology is. For the Church comes to be known by the work of the Holy Spirit, in dying to self alongside Jesus who is the "grain" of the universe, and by the gifts God gives the Church to be sustained, even as those gifts appear in ordinary manner to otherwise untrained eyes. That eyes need to be trained in order to see these gifts is, itself, a nice set-up for the following section on character, which we shall turn to shortly.

Yet maybe the greatest evidence for how Hauerwas understands the nature and purpose of the Christian community can be found in the interplay between these critics and Hauerwas. Does Gustafson's "ghetto" critique spur Hauerwas to retrieve "resident aliens"? Maybe. Does Healy's account of the lack of theocentric ecclesiology inspire *The Holy Spirit*? Possibly. Is it significant that *Resident Aliens* and *The Holy Spirit* are written with William H. Willimon, an established pastor and bishop in an "empirical church"? Most certainly. Hauerwas presents the Christian community as an interpretive community, one forever engaged in a discussion of the moral resources God gives it—and their stewardship—for the living of holy, faithful lives. That Hauerwas so often works in community (he has a number of books with co-authors, Willimon chief among them) and even appears responsive to his critics ("love thy enemy"?) is a reflection

of the sort of Church Hauerwas envisions, writes from, and writes to. For all the above handwringing about his questionable ecclesial identity, it is his very critiques who have performed his vision of the Church just as well as he or anyone.

Community and Contingency

Contingency is even more evident in Hauerwas' sense of community than it was in narrative. Narrative may have been troubled by the contingency of competing interpretations, but community is troubled by the contingency of competing interpreters. To be sure, the Church is a messy place. A diversity of individuals, each with unique life experiences, proclivities, varying degrees of faithfulness, and authority within the institution could make the Church little else but this. The criticism of Hauerwas is often that he appears disconnected from this messiness because he writes so normatively about the Church and its "marks." Yet the opposite is true. While it is his critics who so often ask "Which church?," it is Hauerwas who notes that such a question, while understandable, is unhelpful; "unhelpful because it encourages a sense of finality that diminishes, rather than builds, the Church. This is a finality that suggests it is possible to 'arrive' at a 'right' Church. Such a Church would be almost bound to foster pride rather than honesty, complacency rather than confidence. It would resemble a too-tidy dogmatics, in that it would provide such a conclusive guarantee of God that witness would seem unnecessary and service would be neglected."¹⁵⁹ Such a quote reminds us that it is probably better to speak of "community *as* contingency" than "community *and* contingency." Once again, we find that contingency is a leitmotif in Hauerwas' theological ethics. It remains to be seen if, or how, this remains true when it comes to character, to which we must turn now.

CHARACTER

¹⁵⁹ BCCE, 23.

Introduction

In Hauerwas' work, character reintroduces the individual in a theology mostly centered in narrative and community. As has been demonstrated above, narrative is an interpretive practice of a people. In the course of interpreting (amongst other actions) these people are made a community. Throughout all that's proceeded, however, the notion of the individual has been reduced smaller and smaller until barely visible at all. Of course, that Hauerwas is writing over and against Modern liberalism and its individualistic assumptions and tendencies makes sense of this reduction to the individual. Yet Hauerwas is no mere communitarian for whom there is no sense of self. It is through character that the self is reintroduced, made visible, and given purpose. This final section will review the relationship of character and human agency, character and vision, and character and Christian life. Of necessity, certain themes around narrative and community will reappear here, hopefully less as a redundancy and more as a stitching together of these three central themes to Hauerwas' theological ethics. And while the individual will be retrieved, sensitivity to the important role of community must still be maintained. No one is an island. Yet for those looking for a sense of their own life in Hauerwas' theological ethics, the turn to character is the best venue for that.

Character and Agency

Because Hauerwas begins his career writing about character, and because he is as much philosophical as theological in his early career, finding concrete definitions of character are much easier than it was to find such definitions for narrative and community, which had to mostly be cobbled together from various writings. To wit:

Character is the qualification or determination of our self-agency, formed by our having certain intentions (and beliefs) rather than others. Once it is clear that character is but the concrete determination of our agency, we can understand why no ultimate distinction can

be made between acquiring character and having character. Character in its particular manifestation cannot be a static possession men [sic]¹⁶⁰ have once and for all.¹⁶¹

Of course, how Hauerwas can arrive at such a concise definition is its own long, circuitous path and what such a definition means in the Christian life is full of meaning for his overall project in theological ethics. To these topics, then, we must turn our attention.

To begin, agency is a pivotal concept in Hauerwas' earliest writings. There can be no doubt that every individual has agency. He does not deny that environmental, social, and psychological factors are important, but—contrary to a Postmodern, social constructionist view—they are not ultimately determinative. For Hauerwas, agency is our ability to deliberately and intentionally act within the world in such a way that the future is different than had we not acted. Interestingly, Hauerwas dedicates more time to revealing a taxonomy of action than he spends on agency, presumably because agency is so action-dependent that it is action which needs best defined. As Hauerwas writes, “in acting I, the agent, make something happen that would not have happened without my agency.”¹⁶² Another way to consider it is this: agency is invisible without action.

It is good to pause here and note that Hauerwas is not presenting action as “choosing.” He has many strong words against the modern assumption that humanity's primary mode of living is through choosing. At this point, action and agency are presented as descriptive, not prescriptive. Action only describes the necessary precondition for character. Indeed, for Hauerwas, action and character are virtually the same thing. To act is to have character and character is revealed in action. Hence, why he writes, that there can be “no ultimate distinction

¹⁶⁰ Regrettably, throughout Hauerwas' early career he employs the faulty “men/man” to mean “humanity/all people.” The above *sic* should be seen to apply to every subsequent use of this faulty term in all future quotations.

¹⁶¹ *CCL*, 115.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 87.

can be made between acquiring character and having character.” There is no agent, no self, behind or beyond our action. As he writes, “our character is the continuing qualification of our agency. If our agency were simply that of a formal or transcendental ‘I,’ we might rightly expect to be able to have some absolute sense of who we are. I have argued, however, that our agency is determinative only as it embodies our description under which we move ourselves to act.”¹⁶³

Because of this link between character, as the most accurate description of the self/agent, and action, Hauerwas will go on to nuance his definition of character as “best understood as a direction or orientation rather than a compelling force.”¹⁶⁴ Character-as-orientation means that past actions are meaningful for future actions, however Hauerwas is quick to claim that they are not determinative. There is the ability to be surprised or challenged in new ways when new events occur in life. As he presents it, character is dynamic, rather than stable, and is constantly interacting with an equally dynamic world in a sort of play that allows newness and surprises, while still maintaining a consistent theme throughout one’s life. For Hauerwas, being moral is not about rules and laws, but about maintaining a correct orientation or direction through all the vicissitudes of life. “This direction is a real determination of the self that provides a basis for moral continuity. The self as agent is the self that has a history that is morally significant for giving new forms of action.”¹⁶⁵

Character and Vision

Just as Hauerwas nuances character with orientation, so he does as well with vision. The roll vision plays in Hauerwas’ early work cannot be overstated enough. To understand the importance of vision, though, one must understand the moral/ethical context in which Hauerwas

¹⁶³ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 209.

writes. At the time of his early works, the mid-1970's, then-contemporary Christian ethics had given itself over to Modernist assumptions about the rational, free-choosing individual. There was a growth in apologetics that Hauerwas finds alarming because it tempts "Christians... [to] consider themselves charged with the task of convincing others of the truth."¹⁶⁶ The act of trying to convince others of the truth often meant starting "with the question of what modern man will accept as true."¹⁶⁷ This cannot hold, however, because "modern man's" understanding of what is true is dependent upon one's vision and this vision has been greatly impaired by the assumptions of the individual as a rational, free-choosing individual, as well as "modern man's one-sided understanding of himself as actor and self-creator."¹⁶⁸ This is where it is important to remember that Hauerwas' use of agent-as-actor is descriptive, whereas the modern impulse was prescriptive. Critics of Hauerwas are tempted to miss this distinction. Not only this, but Hauerwas is clear that we are not self-creators as he still holds to "the classical insight of Christian and philosopher alike that the measure of moral goodness ultimately lies outside ourselves."¹⁶⁹

Thus, it is in the context of modern ethics, which "has failed to emphasize the categories that could give men an appreciation for their condition as finite, limited, and sinful beings,"¹⁷⁰ that Hauerwas presents vision as the necessary corrective because "moral behavior is an affair not primarily of choice but of vision."¹⁷¹ Yet vision is not easily achieved precisely because we are "finite, limited, and sinful beings" and are thus terrified by "the fact that our lives are bounded by chance and death, [so] we anxious and self-preoccupied people construct a veil to

¹⁶⁶ *IV*, 102.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

conceal the essential pointlessness of our existence. To be human is to create illusion.”¹⁷² As a result, the first task of both having and acquiring character, which for Hauerwas are nearly indistinguishable, is cultivating the appropriate vision of the world, for how we see determines to a great extent how we will act. It is here that the value of Christian discipleship for character is introduced for “being a Christian... is a way of attending to the world. It is learning ‘to see’ the world under the mode of the divine. Thus, it is not a matter of indifference how the nature of God and his relationship to the world is conceived.”¹⁷³ As a result, “a Christian does not simply ‘believe’ certain propositions about God; he learns to attend to reality through them.”¹⁷⁴

For Hauerwas, and contrary to modern Christian ethics, the goal of the ethical life is not to know how to choose rightly when the big issues of the day are presented, but rather it is a matter “of finding what the truth is in the small questions that confront us every day. It is a matter of what we do with our time, whether we are willing to work to make our marriages worthwhile, how well we perform our everyday tasks. The main problem of the moral life is not to come to monumental decisions but to live through the contingencies of our lives.”¹⁷⁵ It makes sense, then, that how one sees the “contingencies of our lives” is significant for leading a moral life. And the best way to learn to see rightly is, maybe surprisingly, not through realistic accounts of the events of our lives, big or small, but through the stories and metaphors that animate our lives. It is not through rules and laws, but through “the stories and metaphors [that] we learn to intend the variety of our existence. Metaphors and stories suggest how we should see and describe the world—that is how we should ‘look-on’ our selves [sic], others, and the world—in

¹⁷² Ibid., 32.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 45-46.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 46.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 47.

ways that rules taken in themselves do not.”¹⁷⁶ For stories are more than the principles they may contain. Indeed, principles that are divorced from their stories immediately fail to convey the same meaning as the stories. Instead, it is through stories and metaphors that we learn to “perceive the world and hence what the moral life is about.”¹⁷⁷ This move to stories reminds the reader of the claim made at the outset, that Hauerwas’ theological ethics is not linear—it does not move from narrative to community, community to character—but rather is a dynamic interplay between all three elements. It will be shown further on how community and character relate, but for now our ability to have character rests in our ability to see rightly, which itself requires good stories. As Hauerwas writes, “Our religious stories and metaphors give expression to the normative commitments we need to make if we desire to live our lives in a morally appropriate way.”¹⁷⁸

Character and Christian Life

All of these elements—agency, actions, orientation/direction, vision, stories and metaphors—are, in the Christian life, part of God’s ongoing sanctification in our lives. For Hauerwas, “Sanctification is the category under which the subjective qualification of the self as determined by the justifying work of Christ is discussed and analyzed”¹⁷⁹ and “Sanctification is not a recommended ethical program of good dispositions and actions but rather the effect of the conformation of the self to God’s act.”¹⁸⁰ Hauerwas follows John Calvin’s understanding of sanctification, in which

sanctification marked such a real change in the believer that he can no longer be identified with the ways of the world. He notes that the very term sanctification denotes separation; to be sanctified means that we are the objects of God’s special providence of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷⁹ *CCL*, 184.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 191.

the Spirit, whereby he separates His own people apart to Himself as sons. This separation is not just for the purposes of our own individual sanctification and salvation, but that we might witness to God's work."¹⁸¹

Since sanctification is the name for cultivating Christian character, then sanctification "is to have one's attention directed by the description of the world that claims it has been redeemed by the work of Christ. To have Christian character is to have our 'seeing' of the world directed by the fundamental symbols of the language of faith."¹⁸² Thus, in sanctification, the "Christian's intention (perhaps better, orientation) involves seeing the world from the particular perspective of all things subject to the will of God and his Kingdom. To be a Christian is to have a particular way of illuminating the world, but in so doing the Christians forms himself in accordance with the image of the very thing he illumines."¹⁸³ This move to the theological category of sanctification reintroduces the importance of the Christian community for the process of acquiring and having character, for it is within this community that the necessary vision is formed and re-formed, and the necessary practices are developed and encouraged. Of all the actions in the church, Hauerwas presents the church at worship as most significant because worship "is the most regular way in which most Christians remind themselves and others and are reminded that they are Christians It is the most significant way in which Christianity takes flesh, evolving from a set of ideas and convictions to a set of practices and a way of life."¹⁸⁴

Worship is the perfect vehicle for Hauerwas because: (1) it moves ethical discourse away from big events and refocuses it on the everyday, humdrum of discipleship; (2) it is animated by stories and metaphors that craft the vision of the worshipper; (3) it embodies a set of concrete, repeated practices that shapes the character of the participant; (4) it is inherently communal in

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 189-190.

¹⁸² Ibid., 203.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁸⁴ *BCCE*, 7.

nature; and (5) it gives him opportunity to connect character-as-sanctification with sanctification's natural partner, justification¹⁸⁵, especially vis-à-vis the sacraments. Of these, the sacraments are particularly important for they reveal not only the character that we are to have, but the very character of God. Hauerwas refutes most contemporary Christian ethics by noting how "it tries to make 'Christian' an adjective, an epithet, a style—when what God offers his people is particular actions—verbs—through which they can become and be distinctive nouns—people, disciples, witnesses."¹⁸⁶ The emphasis on "verbs" (actions) and "nouns" (character) harmonize well with Hauerwas' overall project and he finds within baptism and communion, especially, the basis for Christian character.

Hauerwas declares baptism the foundation for Christian ethics and notes three dimensions to the story of Jesus' baptism that are important for the cultivation of character. "First, heaven, which has been closed for a long time, is opened. This epitomizes the fruit of Christ's work. The gospel begins with the tearing of the heavens and ends with the tearing of the temple curtain. The veil between God and his people has been torn. Heaven is open to those who stand where Christ stands."¹⁸⁷ (15) There is a further significant aspect to this first point, namely that "the open heaven also confirms that earth is the theater of God's action. The author has joined the drama. The key events of the world are key also to the life of God."¹⁸⁸ Hauerwas continues: "Second, God's Spirit descends like a dove. At the end of the Flood, the dove brought the twig of new life back to Noah. Now the dove descends on Jesus, bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is the Temple of God's Holy Spirit. He is the place where others will encounter

¹⁸⁵ Hauerwas writes in *Character and the Christian Life* that "some means must be found to explicate and reformulate the believer's relation to Christ's work. This was done principally by maintaining the close interdependence between justification and sanctification—i.e., between the objective act of God for man and the subjective effect that it has for the believer." (CCL, 184).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 15.

God.”¹⁸⁹ Finally, “God speaks, and he tells his people how precious is the gift they have in Jesus. The voice tells God’s people that Jesus means everything to God, and that God makes himself fully known in Jesus. It also holds out the promise that, just as God gives everything to Jesus, everything he gives to Jesus he gives through Jesus to his people. And, ultimately, the promise of this is that God’s people mean everything to God.”¹⁹⁰ Baptism is one of the primary images by which Christians are encouraged to see both their lives and the world in which they live. Through their baptisms, Christians are empowered to see God at work in the world, God present in the world, and their own importance as God’s people, which is an identity not of their own creation, but of gift from God. All subsequent actions and resulting character ought to be derived from this vision, which becomes Christian ethics, for “Christian ethics names the things that the baptism of Christ enables Christians to do.”¹⁹¹

Baptism introduces communion because “the baptism of Christ announces the end of slavery and exile, and inaugurates the new crossing-over into the dwelling with God. God wants his people to worship him. He made his people to glorify and enjoy him forever. He also wants his people to be his friends.”¹⁹² Friendship is central to the Christian life because in enacting friendship with one another, Christians learn the skills necessary to be friends with God. Yet as important as friendship is, Hauerwas prefers another word—“companion”—for this word literally means “one who shares bread,” which brings baptism into communion with the Eucharist. As Hauerwas writes, “In the Eucharist they [Christians] recognize that God wants them to worship him, to be his friends, and to eat with him. It is through baptism, the baptism of Christ embodied in their own baptism, that Christians are enabled to realize these goals; and it is

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹² Ibid., 16.

in the Eucharist that the goals of God’s creation and redemption come to fruition.”¹⁹³ The Eucharist is eschatological in its performance as it gives Christians a foretaste of the world to come, while empowering them to be witnesses in the world that is. Witnesses, significantly, do not merely point to what is, but what can and will be.

The Eucharist is further a gift to the church and is constructive of Christian character in the way that it binds time. “Because it must be corporate and requires preparation, it makes the Church find a regular rhythm of celebration. And this regular rhythm of celebration comes to order the shapelessness of time. Life is no longer a linear flow of one thing after another, but an ebb and flow, a constant sending out to love and serve and share, a constant return and gathering to praise and repent and ask.”¹⁹⁴ Earlier Hauerwas noted that the cultivation of character was about the everyday—how we find meaning in our marriages, what we do with our time, etc.—and so now we find that the corporate practice of Eucharist is God’s gift to God’s people for through it they employ their agency in an action that both builds the future they desire, companionship with God, as well as witnesses to the future that they trust God will give them as gift. If character development is about acting rightly in one’s agency, then the Eucharist is the model of right action given by God to the Church, as well as a reflection of the very character of God that the people of God are to embody if they are to be faithful. The Eucharist, thus, is the beginning of Christian character formation, but it is not the end. It is a significant action because “learning to perform this action well informs and educates Christians in their performance of all other actions.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 20.

It is noticeable that Hauerwas, when he moves to liturgy, also makes a shift from the self-agent/individual to a more corporate address. As was noted above, character formation has strong communal aspects because “the Church is what it does.”¹⁹⁶ For those who seek to criticize Hauerwas for his nearly-mythological church—that is, those whose understanding of church is implicitly driven by their institutional understandings of it—Hauerwas recasts church through the prism of action, which is to say the lens of character. It’s identity as a community is also its commission; it’s understanding of itself is also its witness. As Hauerwas writes, “The Church thus has a twofold ministry, pointing to both the sovereignty of Christ’s person and the pattern of his work. In short, the Church is a prophet and priest that points to the king.”¹⁹⁷ As the body of Christ—the Christ who is prophet, priest, and king—the Church witnesses as prophet and priest to the king, of which it is substantively a part. This movement away from an institutional understanding of the church, an understanding likely more indebted to industry and capitalism than following Jesus, renders the critics’ question of “which church?” a moot point, as was noted above. Instead, the church is “conformed to Christ,”¹⁹⁸ and who, “through catechesis, study, fasting, reflection, direction, imitation of the saints, and baptism, the disciple becomes part of Christ’s body.”¹⁹⁹ This conformation is but one action in the character formation of the Christian in the church. The other three are participation, restoration, and rhythm. Participation means participating “in the politics of the Church,”²⁰⁰ by which

The members of the body deliberate over the goods of their life and the gifts God has given them; through casuistry they establish the practicalities of witness in the particularities of service; through mission they seek to extend the goods of their fellowship into partnerships in all corners of the world, especially the most benighted

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 24.

ones, longing for the kingdom, looking for the work of the Spirit, and expecting to meet Christ in friend and stranger²⁰¹

Restoration involves engagement “in the reconciling practice of God and the Church,”²⁰² by which, “through admonition, discipline, repentance, confession, reconciliation, and restoration the disciple and the community experience and practice God in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.”²⁰³ Finally, the Christian character “enters into the rhythm of God’s life, the pattern of the dance of the Trinity,”²⁰⁴ which involves “the humility of repeating the same practices over and over again receives the wonder of discovering through them the God who is ever new.”²⁰⁵ This rhythm is, indeed, repetitious, which reminds us that “following Jesus... is also about the ordinary, the routine, the common, the everyday, the trivial.”²⁰⁶

As we conclude this subsection on character, a final, summarizing point by Hauerwas seems worth quoting at length. In this quote, Hauerwas is no longer speaking explicitly of character, and yet if we’ve learned what Hauerwas means by character, then we can see that he is. For now, though he speaks of “Christianity,” this is no general term, but rather the word that describes the ethics of being formed by a narrative, confirmed in a community, and conformed in our character to the character of God. As Hauerwas, thus, concludes:

Christianity names the lives, events, and ideas that the Church traces across hundreds of years and perceives as a purposeful story. The Church names the community that abides across time and space, making it possible for people to know and to become part of that story, the story of God’s way with creation, the story of a friendship begun, frustrated, restored, sustained, and destined to be fulfilled. The Eucharist names the ordered series of practices that Christians carry out regularly together in obedience to Jesus’s command, as a way of becoming more like him, and as a witness to God’s world. In the Eucharist Christians recall the glorious story of salvation, recognize how inadequately their lives have reflected it, and then retell that story as they gather all that they are and hope to be

²⁰¹ Ibid., 24.

²⁰² Ibid., 24.

²⁰³ Ibid., 24.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 24.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 24.

into the one great prayer of thankfulness to the One who has given life. All that Christians do and do not do thus finds its intelligibility in the worship of God.²⁰⁷

Character and Contingency

If ethics is viewed—as it is when unduly influenced by Modern liberalism—as knowing which choice is the right choice in a particular situation, issues of norms, principles, and rules are bound to flourish. Yet the varieties of human experience means that there will always be exponential issues arising in life for which the last set of rules, norms, and principles no longer apply as well as they did. The name for all this is “contingency.” Modern liberalism is particularly vulnerable to contingencies, which may explain precisely why resorts to violence are so common. Violence but names the practice of abolishing, diminishing, or dismissing certain contingencies that are difficult to make intelligible in a Modernistic worldview. True sin abounds, of course, when these “contingencies” are human lives, and the act of abolishment takes the form of harm against actual bodies.

Hauerwas’ move to character is, therefore, an important step away from the *modus operendi* of Modernity as it allows for nearly infinite variety of circumstances to present and then trusts in the story-formed, community-supported character of each individual to respond correctly and faithfully to every contingency. Simply put, without character we would be bound to an ever-growing canon of law to regulate behavior. Contingency, as a description and not prescription, undergirds the purpose of Hauerwas’ theological ethics. Without it, ethics would look much different.

CONCLUSION

The church’s narratives, stories, and metaphors are what help fashion a people, though at the same time, it is the community of the people of God living faithfully after God that inspires

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 49-50.

the creation of such stories. In the same way, stories and metaphors give the people the vision necessary to pursue their character in Christ, but at the same time, one cannot know how to read these stories or interpret these metaphors if they have not formed the right character, by the community's thick practices, necessary for such interpretation. The community of the Church is a community, but it is only a community in that it acts (or, in other words, exercises its character) in such a manner that it displays the type of community it is, which is to say, that the church is not a static entity, nor an institution, but rather a manifestation of its actions. In the same way, character may be an aspect of the self-agent, but the self-agent cannot be formed within the agent's individuality, but rather through a community who holds the practices and provides the accountability necessary to actually practice them. As we can see, narrative folds into community, just as community blends into narrative; narrative creates character, just as character makes the narrative intelligible; the community exists, but only as an exercise of its character; character can only be formed rightly in the community. This interplay smacks of Triune love, in which the Father loves the Son, and the Son, the Father; the Father loves the Spirit, and the Spirit the Father; the Son loves the Spirit; and the Spirit, then Son. Around and around it goes and the genius of Hauerwas' theological ethics—that which makes it so thoroughly Christian—can be seen in how closely it resembles the Triune God from whence it comes and to which it returns.

This brief (and given the scope of Hauerwas' nearly half-century career, this has been brief) overview of Hauerwas' theological ethics shall serve as the basis for all future chapters, especially the next chapter, in which we investigate how this theological methodology can and should be employed in conversations about Christian marital and sex ethics. By now, the reader should suspect that when Hauerwas speaks about sex, he is going to be speaking about baptism,

worship, character, witness, and the whole host of the Christian life. While many in this field are content to address marriage, sex, divorce, cohabitation, abortion, gender, queer theory/theology, and the like as independent events or topics, Hauerwas will remain true to the form presented here—and the conversation around sex and marriage is all the better for it.

Chapter 2

Hauerwas on Christian Marital and Sex Ethics

Introduction

Hauerwas' entire theological programme is ripe for a discussion about Christian marital and sex ethics, especially given both its liturgical emphases (marriage) and focus on the ordinary (sex). While known largely as a pacifist—a topic on which he has spilled more than a little ink—he has a surprising number of essays on sex and marriage. Yet while his corpus is considerable, he has not exhausted the topic. Indeed, the remaining chapters of this book after the present one will be dedicated to either providing additional clarity (same-sex marriage in chapters three and four) or directly addressing topics that receive only a glancing blow from him (cohabitation in chapter five). The goal of these latter chapters will be to move from “Hauerwas” to “Hauerwasian”—that is to say, to move from recounting and elucidating his own work to building from it.

While the previous chapter employed contrary voices to Hauerwas' overall theological methodology, this chapter will focus on letting Hauerwas speak more clearly. Thick summaries of his position on topics such as marriage, same-sex marriage, singleness, children and family, children with cognitive disabilities, abortion, and conception will create the matrix of both what and *how* Hauerwas understands these topics. Subsequent chapters will, by dint of his lack of clarity or silence, focus more of the *how* to supplement the dearth of *what*.

While direct challenges to Hauerwas' work will not feature in this chapter, we must still begin with a recounting of some of the methodological temptations that come in addressing topics like marriage and sex. These temptations exist either because they carry enough Christian conviction to warrant consideration, even if eventual dismissal (natural law), or because they are

so overwhelmingly pervasive in the broader, Modern liberal society (realism and romanticism). The specific nature of these temptations is a reminder that Hauerwas is often splitting time between confronting the Church directly, the culture directly, and the culture's syncretizing effects on the Church directly. At times it isn't even abundantly clear who his foil is, though failure in clarity for the antithesis should not be mistaken for a failed thesis. As we shall come to see—and should likely anticipate given Hauerwas' overall theological methodology outlined in chapter one—the Church has a constructive contribution to marriage and sex as made intelligible only by the narrative, community, and character Christians ought to embody. Even without cultural or ecclesial foils, Hauerwas has something to say.

To begin with all of the various, competing cultural views—the methodological temptations—of marriage and sex ethics is to acknowledge that the plight of the contemporary Christian raised in a North American context in the latter half of the twentieth and earliest parts of the twenty-first centuries will have been inundated with countless myths, half-truths, and outright lies about sex and marriage—many of them from the Church. Thus, it is necessary to begin a review of Hauerwas' perspective on marriage and sex by clearing epistemological and ethical space for such assertions to even be heard. Even still, it cannot be denied that such a beginning cannot but appear polemical. Yet as the first chapter tried to make clear, “polemical” is just the word that Modern political liberalism uses to describe any discourse that challenges or threatens its basic presuppositions. Within the Christian tradition, “prophetic” is a much better descriptor.

For Hauerwas, there are many contrary voices speaking on marriage and sex, including natural law, realism, and romanticism. In various writings and in various ways, Hauerwas confronts each of these ideologies and reveals their underlying principles, all while writing

within the context of the so-called sexual revolution begun in the 1960s. Each of these approaches must, therefore, be discussed and summarily dismissed here before more positive appraisals of Hauerwas' work can be given.

One other prefatory remark is worth making and that is the reminder that while Hauerwas addresses different discrete topics—abortion, marriage, same-sex attraction, etc.—in different essays, his is not a cobbled-together, patchwork approach to marriage and sex. Rather, context and culture require that certain topics be addresses in certain ways, but he works diligently to present each topic as but a spoke coming from the center. Practically, however, this makes summarizing Hauerwas' views of marriage and sex difficult. As such, this chapter will address different topics in subsections while consciously seeking to add a concluding reflection from each topic that points back to the center of the wheel. Because the center is what it is, this means there is apt to be some repetition, but through this repetition—hopefully repetition of the same character as one finds in the Church's liturgy—the truth might be made clearer and clearer. Indeed, the image of a wheel with spokes takes an added dimension in constructing this chapter thusly, as the repetitive return to central points will be like a wheel going around and around. Since this chapter is prepared to risk redundancy, it is worth stating at the outset what the center of Hauerwas' thinking is on marriage and sex. For Hauerwas, marriage and sex (as well as children, abortion, etc.) can only be intelligible based upon the political commitments of the church. In this case, “political” should be understood as it was defined in the previous chapter, namely, as the polity that forms and enlivens the Church. Polity, so understood, is a shorthand—in what should now be understood in the classically Hauerwas interdependent manner—for the church as a community, its narrative, and its intended character.

METHODOLOGICAL TEMPTATIONS

Hauerwas' relationship with natural law or natural theology is at once both simple and complicated. On the one hand, he disregards it as a useful or faithful approach. As he writes, "attempts to base a Christian ethics of sex on natural law—whether natural law be understood as unexceptional norms or broadly construed anthropological characterizations of human sexuality—must be abandoned."²⁰⁸ For Hauerwas, sex and marriage only make sense when they are understood in and part of a broader polity. He even notes that irony that natural law approaches to human sexuality and the liberalization of sexuality in the latter-half of the twentieth century both pursue "abstracting sex from those institutions that are necessary to make any ethic of sex intelligible."²⁰⁹ So thorough is his rejection of this approach that there would appear to be little room for nuance. Yet nuance he provides.

In With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology

Hauerwas attempts to reclaim natural theology—and simultaneously to claim Karl Barth as the great natural theologian—by redefining the concept, as noted in chapter one, as "the attempt to witness to the nongodforsakenness of the world even under the conditions of sin."²¹⁰ His contention is that contemporary understanding of natural law looks nothing like its historic antecedents. He cites Aquinas' use of natural law and reason as evidence of this. "For Aquinas, knowledge attained by 'natural reason' is not more certain than that attained by revelation; 'natural' and 'revelation' do not name epistemological alternatives. Thus, those who attempt in the name of Aquinas to develop a 'natural theology'—that is, a philosophical defense of 'theism' as a propaedeutic for any further 'confessional' claims one might want to make—are engaged in an enterprise that Aquinas would not recognize."²¹¹ The moment when "natural" and

²⁰⁸ "Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It," *HR*, 175-95.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 483.

²¹⁰ *WGU*, 20.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

“revelation” were separated and made distinct goes by the name Modernity, in which only reason was trustworthy for understanding the known world and guiding right thinking within it. Revelation was granted value, but only as it pertained to the ethical or moral sphere. This schism between natural and revealed, however, is not part of God’s character and if theology is meant to speak rightly about God, then this schism must be avoided. Hauerwas then contends that it is Barth who gets closest to maintaining this unity over and against Modernity’s attempt to divorce the two because “Barth, in spite of his disavowal of natural theology, provides the resources necessary for developing an adequate theological metaphysics, or, in other words, a natural theology. Of course, I assume that ‘natural theology’ simply names how Christian convictions work to describe all that is as God’s good creation.”²¹²

Some may claim that Hauerwas is merely altering the definition of natural law in order to reclaim it to his own benefit. Yet that seems both disingenuous to the earnestness of his attempt and illogical. There is no reason, especially as a Protestant theologian, that he could not just join the hordes of those who reject natural theology as a Catholic dogma. As such, we must assume that he desires to reclaim natural law/theology because it is both right and useful to the church’s witness to God. He says, via his interpretation of Barth, nearly as much when he writes, “For Barth, theology is in service to the church’s witness to God’s reconciling and redeeming work in Jesus Christ. If natural theology is to be a necessary feature of theology, it cannot pretend to be more than a part of the witness that is the church.”²¹³

The problem with natural law arises when it attempts to make God relevant to the world, rather than help the world become relevant to God. Again, Hauerwas follows Barth, now interpreting the latter’s commentary on Romans thusly: “In his Romans commentary, Barth is

²¹² Ibid., 142.

²¹³ Ibid., 146.

doing no more than reminding us that what is wrong with the world is its failure to acknowledge that God is God.”²¹⁴ Natural theology, as a unique expression of theology, is still tasked with helping reveal the world to the world’s self. It is still theology, which is just the term the church uses to describe one type of speech in its witness to the world of the world’s need for the reconciliation to the Father through the Son. For Hauerwas, this was well understood in Aquinas’ time, but was lost under Modernity.

Hauerwas cites Nicholas Wolterstorff to help better differentiate between the different eras of natural theology. Wolterstorff argues that

The medieval project of natural theology was profoundly different from the Enlightenment project of evidentialist apologetics. It has different goals, presupposed different convictions, and was evoked by a different situation. It is true that some of the same arguments occur in both projects; they migrate from the one to the other. But our recognition of the identity of the émigré must not blind us to the fact that he has migrated from one “world” to another.²¹⁵

Hauerwas continues, “Wolterstorff characterizes ‘evidentialist apologetics’ as the frame of mind that assumes that unless one has good reasons for one’s theistic beliefs, one ought to give them up.”²¹⁶ Thus, we can reasonably conclude that natural theology that finds itself serving a lesser rhetorical and epistemological role of apologetics is dismissed by Hauerwas for already ceding more ground in its attempt to witness than it could ever hope to gain back. It cedes this ground by presuming that God has to be made intelligible to standards and systems outside God’s self, rather than these systems and standards finding their veracity, or not, in relation to God. As Hauerwas writes, “natural theology divorced from a full doctrine of God cannot help but distort

²¹⁴ Ibid., 152.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 27; quoting Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (eds. Robert Audi and William Wainwright, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 39.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

the character of God and, accordingly, of the world in which we find ourselves.”²¹⁷ However, if natural theology is understood as but another branch of all theology, which is itself the church speaking rightly about God, then it is an articulation of God’s will and work in the world and becomes a form of sanctified speech.

On the whole, most usages of natural law are too indebted to the Modernist transformation of natural law to be of sound use in any ethical discourse for Hauerwas, including—maybe especially—discourse on sex.

Natural law and its transformation under the weight of Modernity is clearly Hauerwas’ largest theological hurdle in confronting contrary voices on sex and marriage, but it is likely not the most popular. That distinction remains equally with realist and romantic approaches. These approaches are forms of popular “wisdom” or guidance in matters related to sex, health, and flourishing. The realist, living up to the name, is pragmatic in their approach—“it is too late to raise ‘moral issues’ about sex, one way or the other”²¹⁸ and, thus, it is better “to get knowledge and techniques to young people who have become ‘sexually active’ so some of the consequences of their behavior can be checked.”²¹⁹ The impulse is equally to demystify sex and “help people have a more healthy attitude toward sex.”²²⁰ While confessing that the realist perspective is one to which he is drawn, Hauerwas does note that even its attempts to be and sound morally neutral, it betrays a different morality. On a footnote on “sexually active” from the quote above, Hauerwas notes “that this kind of language-transforming proposal assumes substantive moral presuppositions.”²²¹ The specific presupposition is that of liberalism, which both “assume[s] that

²¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

²¹⁸ “Sex in Public,” *HR*, 484.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 484.

²²⁰ Ibid., 484.

²²¹ Ibid., 484, fn. 6.

the way things are is the ways things ought to be”²²² and “that sexual activity should be determined by what each individual feels is good for him or her.”²²³ That a different morality is at play is easily demonstrated in the appeal to different ways about which to speak of sex. If one were to say that a young person is “sexually promiscuous,” they could easily be labeled judgmental. The use of “sexually active” is, likely, a more objective accounting, but is preferred not only for its objectivity but as a way of morally regulating those who would attempt to use more judgmental language. No act of moral regulation can occur outside of a broader (or different) morality. The objectivity of it all, we discover, is but a façade covering over a subtle ethic.

Hauerwas does not so much reject realism as he notes that it is, itself, incomprehensible given the other, dominant manner which we speak about sex—romantically. Hauerwas writes, “the basic assumption of romanticism is that love is the necessary condition for sex and marriage”²²⁴ and that “the quality of the interpersonal relation between a couple is the primary issue for considering sexual involvement.”²²⁵ Leaving aside the fact that, especially in youth, a high enough concentration of hormones and lust is almost always going to feel like love and intimacy, Hauerwas’ greater concern is the sort of character that is formed through such appeals to love and intimacy. He comes to this critique by way of an honest appraisal of open marriages, focusing particularly on Nena and George O’Neill’s 1972 book, *Open Marriage*. After giving *Open Marriage* a fair summary, Hauerwas notes that an open marriage “requires a transformation of the self that makes intimate relationships impossible in or outside of

²²² Ibid., 485.

²²³ Ibid., 485.

²²⁴ Ibid., 485.

²²⁵ Ibid., 486.

marriage”²²⁶ because “the ideal candidate for an open marriage turns out to be the self-interested individual presupposed and encouraged by our liberal political structure and our capitalist consumer economy.”²²⁷ Such an individual—that is, one who would work diligently and intentionally to develop the sort of character necessary to sustain an open marriage, while not succumbing to “that primitive emotion called jealousy”²²⁸—will become the sort of person who is incapable of actual intimacy, “for intimacy depends on the willingness to give of the self, to place oneself in the hands of another, to be vulnerable, even if that means we may be hurt.”²²⁹ For an approach that begins in “the quality of interpersonal relation” (or intimacy), this is an ironic place to end. Yet the greatest detriment to romanticism is the implicit appeal to the individual or private self, devoid of moral obligation to a broader community or polity. For Hauerwas, the privatization of sex and love “masks a profound commitment to the understanding of society and self [that is] sponsored by political liberalism. Thus, human relations are increasingly understood in contractual terms and the idea self becomes the person capable of understanding everything and capable of being hurt by nothing.”²³⁰

Natural law, realism, romanticism, all three are attempts to speak about sex as if it were a thing itself. Each divorces sex and marriage from any explicit broader connection—though, as Hauerwas has shown, each is dependent upon and in service to political liberalism. Each is potent in either its supposed theological importance (natural law) or its cultural sway (realism/romanticism). Yet each fails to help guide the discourse on sex and marriage both back to its origins and forward toward its destiny, namely as various expressions of the church’s

²²⁶ Ibid., 487.

²²⁷ Ibid., 487.

²²⁸ Ibid., 488.

²²⁹ Ibid., 488.

²³⁰ Ibid., 489.

witness to God's reconciling act through Jesus Christ. For this is the thrust of what Hauerwas provides in his theological ethics on sex and marriage. Hauerwas recovers the missional position of sex and marriage in Christian theology. As he does so, he also explores how singleness and children, including especially the raising of children with cognitive disabilities, with a family also serve as witness to who God is and what God is doing in the world. It is also through the lens of witness that Hauerwas creates space for same-sex marriage and can confront abortion. These, then, make up the primary themes of Hauerwas' constructive theological ethics for marriage and sex.

MARRIAGE

For all of Hauerwas' writings on marriage and sex ethics, it is in an interview with Peter Mommsen of *Plough Quarterly* where he gives his most concise definition. Definition, though, is the incorrect term because Hauerwas is more comfortable describing marriage, which he does thusly: "Marriage is the lifelong commitment to be faithful to one another, not only in terms of sexual relations but in terms of being attentive to your first responsibility to the person to whom you have pledged your life. Marriage gives witness to the same kind of faithfulness of Christ to his church. Part of this commitment includes hospitality to new life, which results from sexual relations."²³¹

This brief description contains within it nearly everything Hauerwas has to say about marriage, including fidelity, witness, and children. Other, lesser, themes appear alongside these—themes like patience, character, hope, and love—but each of these are but rearticulating the dominant themes.

²³¹ Peter Mommsen, "Why Community Is Dangerous: An Interview with Stanley Hauerwas," *Plough Quarterly* No. 9 (Summer 2016), <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/why-community-is-dangerous> (accessed August 28, 2019).

Fidelity is not so much central but the primary witness to that which is central, namely that in marriage a couple enacts the church's politics to live as witnesses to the world God has created and redeemed in Jesus Christ. As Hauerwas writes, "fidelity makes sense only if it occurs in a community that has a mission in which marriage serves a central political purpose."²³² To be sure, some of the lesser themes—patience, love—are also forms of particular witness to the world. For instance, marriage is a practice of the church that signals God's apocalyptic reign. As Hauerwas preached in a wedding homily for two students, "Apocalyptic names the time required to give you the patience you will need to discover the love that makes marriage, and in particular, your marriage, a sign that God's rule is a present reality."²³³ Since marriage is constituted by the church and the church lives in different time than that understood by the world, then marriage becomes a practice that breeds the virtue of patience in those who pursue it. Something similar is afoot with the theme of love, in which Hauerwas claims that the first goal is "to be loved by God and so to love God, and then possibly ourselves, and if we have gotten that far we may even discover we can love our neighbor, who may be our enemy, which often turns out to be the necessary condition for those who are married to love one another."²³⁴ Again, "love," which Hauerwas thinks "is far too vague a term to do any work in helping us to discover the disciplines necessary to sustain a marriage, particularly in our cultural context,"²³⁵ must be first understood in terms of God's movement toward humanity before it can be developed into an ecclesial practice that humanity directs toward one's self and one another. Put more positively, and using Paul's hymn to love found in 1 Corinthians 13, "love describes the love that animates

²³² "Sex in Public," *HR*, 500.

²³³ Stanley Hauerwas, "An Apocalyptic Marriage" in *Disrupting Time: Sermons, Prayers, and Sundries* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 113.

²³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, "Love: A Sermon," in *Working with Words* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 139.

²³⁵ *BH*, 49.

the body of Christ, the church, made present through the inauguration of the new age.”²³⁶ All of these themes—fidelity, patience, love—are but part of the broader work, or politics, of the church committed to living in the new age Christ has initiated. Such work is inherently countercultural to a world formed in fear, despair, and death. As is so often the case, Hauerwas’ greatest insights come more as he deconstructs what the world regards as “natural,” but that Christ reveals as broken.

For instance, in Hauerwas’ evaluation of Jonathan Schell’s book *The Fate of the Earth*, he heaps praise on Schell for espying and illuminating the connection between marriage, divorce, and nuclear armament. Schell argues, in Hauerwas’ words, that our “attitudes toward marriage and sex... are the result of our living in fear of a nuclear world.”²³⁷ However, Hauerwas “wonder[s] if his diagnosis has not put the matter backward.”²³⁸ Instead, “the crucial link between marriage and future generations... had occurred prior to our ability to blow the world up. It was broken not by the bomb, but by the attempt by many to make sex free from what were perceived to be life-denying restraints inherited from repressive traditions.”²³⁹ Hauerwas invokes a sort of death-impulse that plagues Modern life precisely because it is cut off from Jesus Christ, the Life. This death-impulse is articulated nicely elsewhere when Hauerwas writes,

Our difficulty with comprehending our death and the death of others has resulted in what Bill May has astutely identified as the pornographic character of death in our culture. The pornography of sex is the depiction of sex abstracted from the human emotions that save sex from reduction to technical gymnastic skill that finally cannot escape being boring. When sex becomes separated from the intimacy that a history of faithfulness has made possible, all that is left is speculative possibilities about what might be done with how many. In a similar fashion, when death is abstracted from human emotion, all that is left

²³⁶ “An Apocalyptic Marriage,” *DT*, 116.

²³⁷ “Lust for Peace,” *US*, 130.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

are the infinite possibilities of killing as many as possible in ever increasing, imaginative ways.²⁴⁰

The inclusion of death in a conversation about marriage and sex may seem odd but is in keeping with Hauerwas' broader pacifist tendencies. As will become apparent, the problem the Church has with sex and marriage is that they have been regarded as topics or issues unto themselves and are not part of a broader polity. Pacifism may not be the entirety of the Church's polity, but it is central enough to Hauerwas' theological ethics that it can help create a context for making marriage and sex intelligible in the first place. Making matters worse is the acceptance of Modern thought's esteeming of freedom or liberty as the *telos* of all life. Such freedom, of course, will repudiate Christian tradition and the corresponding restraints within marriage so that "we say we are liberating ourselves from a repressive and tyrannical past, but in fact we are willing our deaths."²⁴¹ Put most simply, "Nuclear weapons do not cause us to reject our future, but rather we have rejected our future and thus created the means of our suicide."²⁴² This aside into nuclear armament serves the purpose of helping the reader understand that what might be regarded as "natural" is also unholy. Freedom could be "natural" as a desire but enacted poorly it becomes the means of our own undoing. Thus, Hauerwas is inclined to reject marriage as "natural" given the brokenness of the world.

Of course, many are quick to argue—from perspectives theological, sociological, and anthropological—that nothing could be more "natural" than marriage. It is here where we are benefitted from remembering Hauerwas' nuanced approach to "nature" recounted above. So, for example, Hauerwas will write antithetically that "Christian marriage is not a 'natural' institution

²⁴⁰ Stanley Hauerwas with Robert J. Dean, *Minding the Web: Making Theological Connections* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 185.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 131.

but rather the creation of a people who marry for very definite purposes.”²⁴³ And yet, at the same time and following Hauerwas’ previous definition of “natural” as being in line with the work and will of God that he derives via Barth, it can be “natural.” The challenge, as we will explore in a latter subsection, is that it is not the *only* natural institution for human intimacy and, indeed, not even the primary one, which is why singleness is just as valid a form of life as marriage. Instead, marriage finds its naturalness in its work of witnessing to the world in which “marriage and procreation are the symbols of the church’s understand that the struggle will be long and arduous. For Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope, in spite of the considerable evidence to the contrary, that God has not abandoned this world.”²⁴⁴ In a world that goes unabandoned by God, marriage is a hopeful institution that points away from itself and toward the reign of God. Ultimately, it would appear that Hauerwas wants to secure marriage as “natural” in the terms that are revealed in Jesus Christ. As he preaches in the same sermon where he evaluates Schell’s book, “The community of the New Age is not one that lives against nature, but rather one that makes possible our living naturally. It is natural that the wolf should dwell with the lamb. It is natural that a suckling child can put her hand in the adder’s den. It is natural that we can be called to form a life with another person that makes possible the begetting of new life. It is natural that such life is the basis of a community that not only avoids killing but requires that we reconcile with those who anger us.”²⁴⁵

Diversions into the nuances of “natural,” however, are not central to what Hauerwas wants to say about marriage. What Hauerwas really wants to say about marriage can only be said

²⁴³ “Sex in Public,” *HR*, 497.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 499.

²⁴⁵ “Lust for Peace,” *US*, 133.

through the theme of witness. This is the case because “the church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization, but stands as a political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ.”²⁴⁶ Witnessing is central to the politics of the church and thus any and every institution of the church, including marriage, must serve this end. Indeed, for Hauerwas, marriage is unintelligible as a topic apart from “the story of Christ” to which the church witnesses. For Hauerwas, “to talk sensibly about sex you must have available determinative practices that place such discussions in a purposive framework.”²⁴⁷ The first of these practices is the public taking of vows in a worship service, which

is a reminder that we as church rightfully will hold you to promise you made when you did not and could not fully comprehend what you were promising. How could anyone *know* what it means to promise life-long monogamous fidelity? From the church’s perspective the question is not whether you know what you are promising; rather, the question is whether you are the kind of person who can be held to a promise you made when you did not know what you were promising.²⁴⁸

Wedding vows become more than mere sentimental pomp by being intentional practices of the church at work. Such practices “cannot help being subversive to the politics of liberalism and the correlative state powers. Indeed, in a world in which we are taught that all human relations are contractual, what could be more offensive than a people who believe in life-long commitments?”²⁴⁹

Marriage so understood, as both affirmation of “the story of Jesus” and confrontation with the world beset against Him, is what gives practices and dispositions such as fidelity, love, patience, and hope their meaning. That such practices might be deemed “natural” is only possible

²⁴⁶ “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses,” *HR*, 114-115.

²⁴⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 125.

²⁴⁸ “The Radical Hope in the Annunciation: Why Both Single and Married Christians Welcome Children,” *HR*, 514.

²⁴⁹ *AC*, 118.

because of what God has done first—and what God promises to do in the end, or in the “New Age”—and not for any other reason. This reveals one of the major twists in Hauerwas’ approach to marriage and sex, because much Christian writing begins in the beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve, the cultural mandate to be fruitful and multiply, and as a reflection of God’s created order. Hauerwas does not so much reject this as he makes the beginning subservient to the end. It is not without significance that Hauerwas names one of his wedding homilies “An Apocalyptic Marriage” because such is the description of the promised *telos* of all humanity bound in Christ by their baptism. The next chapter, on the biblical narrative of marriage and sex, will investigate further the significance and implications of the eschatological vision of the wedding feast, but for now it is sufficient to note Hauerwas’ clear turn to the end, which reframes and re-narrates that which came before it chronologically. Reframed and re-narrated as it is, marriage’s chief function is to witness to the politics of the Body called the Church, specifically through the aforementioned themes and through children, which we shall turn to later in this chapter. Ironically, it is precisely this eschatological character to marriage that renders marriage and the family secondary in the church. As Hauerwas writes, “the ambivalence of the church toward marriage and family is grounded in the eschatological conviction that we live in the end times. The church as the community of that time is freed from the necessity of marriage.”²⁵⁰ This ambivalence means that marriage is not essential, which itself means it can be received as a gift for, most truthfully, “Marriage is God’s gift to the church through which the hope born by the gift of the kingdom patiently learns to wait in the time made possible by the presence of children.”²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ *AC*, 128.

²⁵¹ “Radical Hope,” *HR*, 513.

This subsection has focused primarily on marriage and not sex because it has been presumed that sex is properly understood within the confines of marriage. For Hauerwas, there is no intelligible way to speak of sex apart from marriage. One cannot appeal to “some general account of human sexuality. Rather, we have marriage as a practice that governs how we think about sex. For Christians there is nothing called premarital sex because we believe that all sex is marital. The problem with sex outside publicly acknowledged marriages is not that it is not sex, but that it is without the purposes that come only from marriage.”²⁵² Given that marriage, and thus sex, are meant to witness to the new life offered in Jesus Christ, one cannot speak about sex independent of marriage without speaking about death. As Hauerwas writes, “Once marriage no longer shapes the meaning of sex, we have brought sex under the reign of death. In the name of freedom, we have given form to our self-hate and doubt, as our sexual ethic manifests a profound lack of confidence that we have anything worthy to pass on to a new generation.”²⁵³

Hauerwas is not unaware that such a discussion is difficult to have, let alone understand, given the current cultural forces at play. As he asks, “How can we expect our young to relate to one another differently when sex has become the primary way they are given to discover what another person is like?”²⁵⁴ Contrary the “realists” and “romantics,” “there is little any ‘ethic’ can do”²⁵⁵ unless one accepts the narrative and practices that give marriage, and thus sex, their intelligibility. Simply put, one cannot accept cultural presuppositions and still hold out hope to provide a constructive sexual ethic. The futility of any such ethic has already been predestined in such a wanting origin. More will be said about sex, generally understood, below.

²⁵² Ibid., 514.

²⁵³ “Lust for Peace,” *US*, 131.

²⁵⁴ *AC*, 131.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 131.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Given Hauerwas' understanding of marriage above, there are both challenges and opportunities in the discussion of same-sex marriage. To begin, the gravity of the topic must be understood because "marriage involves issues at the basis of any society and that changing them means changing a whole social order."²⁵⁶ As such, Traditionalists, who claim that the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples is a significant movement, are not wrong. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is a wrong movement. The challenge becomes finding the basis to even make a declaration of right or wrong that is not, itself, rooted in Modernist assumptions of marriage, sex, and reality.

This is, at any rate, Hauerwas' first complaint about the topic. In one interview, he is asked about debates in the United Methodist and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denominations. In response he notes that "The problem with debates about homosexuality is they have been devoid of any linguistic discipline that might give you some indication what is at stake."²⁵⁷ This lack of linguistic is exemplified, for Hauerwas, "When couples come to minister to talk about their marriage ceremonies, ministers think it's interesting to ask if they love one another. What a stupid question! How would they know? A Christian marriage isn't about whether you're in love. Christian marriage is giving you the practice of fidelity over a lifetime in which you can look back upon the marriage and call it love. It is a hard discipline over many years."²⁵⁸ Because ministers have succumbed to an uncritical appraisal of "love," Hauerwas concedes that "when marriage becomes a mutually enhancing arrangement until something goes wrong, then it makes no sense at all to oppose homosexual marriage."²⁵⁹ To this, though, he quickly adds, "If marriage

²⁵⁶ *AC*, 120.

²⁵⁷ "Faith Fires Back: A Conversation with Stanley Hauerwas," *DT*, 187.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

is a calling that makes promises of lifelong monogamous fidelity in which children are welcomed, then we've got a problem. But we can't even get to a discussion there, because Christians no longer practice Christian marriage."²⁶⁰

Hauerwas is far from a full-throated advocate for same-sex marriage in the church and rails against churches' trendy use of "inclusive," claiming that it exists because it is "a necessary strategy for survival in what is religiously a buyers' market."²⁶¹ All of this may mark him as more of a Traditionalist on the matter, except that he doesn't believe Traditionalists are any the closer to truth than those who sell out to romantic accounts of love and marriage as an institution for self-fulfillment. In a world where same-sex attracted people have been labeled "intrinsically disordered," Hauerwas turns this slander back against the church—and society—that has lost all meaning in marriage. This is no better seen than in an article he penned for the *Charlotte Observer* in 1993 regarding gay servicemen and women in the United States military. In this brief, sardonic piece, Hauerwas begins by noting that "Discrimination against gays grows from the moral incoherence of our lives; people who are secure in their convictions and practices are not so easily threatened by the prospects of a marginal group acquiring legitimacy through military service."²⁶² In this instance, it is reasonable to swap out "marriage" for "military service" and to understand the Church as embodying "moral incoherence."

Twenty years later, Hauerwas revisited this same article and maintained his original position, namely that the Church persists in a state of moral incoherence that makes same-sex marriage a primary issue in its life only because it has nothing to say to or about the actual, primary issues facing the church. This time, though, he implicitly addresses gay and lesbian

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁶² "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)," *HR*, 519.

Christians as a way of inviting their understanding of the marriage they seek to be part of the Church's broader policy. As he writes,

I once wrote an essay called 'Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)' in which I argued that gays had done an extraordinary thing—they had got themselves banned from the military as a group. Why, I asked, could not Christians as a group get themselves banned from the military? The essay was not really, of course, about gays but rather was a way to help Christians discern why their arguments about gays reflect more the class character of the church than the theological convictions that should inform such discussion. Ask yourself what arguments about gays might look like if Christians were seen as so subversive that they could not be trusted to be in the military. The ethics of sex would not be considered primarily in terms of what is or is not fulfilling for an individual, but rather in terms of what kinds of discipline are necessary to sustain a community distrusted by the wider society. Would gays (who have enough trouble already) want to be members of such a group? Moreover, if they did want to be Christians, they would have to understand that their 'sexuality' could not be the most important thing the church has to consider. Rather, Christians must lead lives of faithfulness that make them warriors against war.²⁶³

Does Hauerwas create space for same-sex marriage if gay couples (and, presumably, this holds true for straight couples too) were to come to the Church under the auspices that their nuptials would make them better "warriors against war" (and, to be clear, such a statement is but a shorthand for better and more faithfully embodying the politics of the Church over and against the world)? It's difficult to say. As recently as 2017, Hauerwas has stated the matter simply: "I can't accept it, as much as I would like to."²⁶⁴ Yet the culprit in this is as much the ontological impossibility of gay couples having children—a significant sticking point as we will see below—as it is the Church's own moral incoherence. As he says, "I just wish that Christian marital practices were sufficient to sustain the acknowledgment of significant gay committed relationships, but our practices are awful, because romantic conceptions of marriage have just

²⁶³ Stanley Hauerwas, "The End of Protestantism" in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 89.

²⁶⁴ Brian Brock and Stanley Hauerwas, *Beginnings: Interrogating Hauerwas*, edited by Kevin Hargaden (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), 189.

destroyed us.”²⁶⁵ And yet, just two years after this conversation with Brian Brock, Hauerwas strikes an entirely different tone while talking with Samuel Wells. As he says there, “One of the interesting ways to think about it is that the gay demand for marriage may save marriage.”²⁶⁶ In this quote, it would appear that Hauerwas is leveling his critique toward straight, Christian marriages, many of which are little more than Church-blessed serial monogamy. If then, gay Christians can embody the discipline of marriage better than their straight counterparts, they may very well “save marriage.” And this, at last, to say, “I think my general position has been shifting in this way. I’m ready to say, if gay people are ready to take on the same kind of promises that non-gay people take on when they get married—lifelong monogamous fidelity is an extraordinary commitment—if gay people are ready to take that on, let’s see how it looks in a hundred years.”²⁶⁷

While Hauerwas is clearly waffling on the issue, even within the space of a few years’ time, it is reasonable to question even the seeming firmness of conviction (or is it acquiescence?) in that last quotation. The question grows in magnitude as we turn to the central issue—at least prior to 2020—for same-sex marriage in Hauerwas’ theological ethics: procreation.

Arguably the greatest sticking point for Hauerwas is marriage’s need to be open to children, as children symbolize the hope Christians have that the Lord is making the world anew. That same-sex couples cannot, without medical intervention, be procreative is a challenge for Hauerwas. However, as will be noted on the subsection on children and family, Hauerwas is no mere advocate for the nuclear family—and is more likely to turn this imperative on openness to children back onto straight couples as he is to use it against same-sex attracted couples, even

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁶⁶ *IC*, 120.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

going so far as to recommend the church consider *not* marrying straight couples who will not declare an openness to having children. This posture, it should be made clear, is not against gay parenting *qua* gay parenting, for as he says, “I am more than ready to acknowledge that gay people can be as good as parents—if not better—than nongay people.”²⁶⁸ No, it is truly the ontology of having children paired with the disposition of being *open* to having children. These competing claims and challenges will be addressed even further in chapter three but are here worth noting as foundational material for that chapter—even if the foundation is a little shaky.

Ultimately, reading Hauerwas tempts one to project one’s own position onto his writings, which—at once—both demonstrates how dangerous his position is and how right it might just be. That he does not allow himself to get trapped into this camp or that is a sign that his greatest urgency is to maintain the church’s witness to the world during this ecclesial debate. He says as much when discussing his own (at the time) Methodist church, claiming that “my deepest problem with the current debate among Methodists is that we become one another’s enemies and as a result fail to notice who the enemy is—that is, capitalism. We fail to see that the debate about ‘sexual identities’ simply reflects the construction of our bodies by economic forces that make us willing consumers capable of producing nothing.”²⁶⁹ That Hauerwas, who roots his theological ethics in narrative, community, and character, deconstructs the church’s debate around same-sex marriage on the unintelligible narrative it is telling, while seeking to maintain the church as a community should not surprise us. Furthermore, by drawing Christians back to the importance of the community as the place of witness and not seemingly perpetual discord, Hauerwas can remind us all that “I know my life and my church’s life are enriched by members of the church who tell me they are gay. I care deeply that their lives may find the support of the

²⁶⁸ *BIH*, 189.

²⁶⁹ *BH*, 50.

church they need, and I need. I am not sure if that makes me pro- or anti-homosexual. I hope it just makes me loyal to the church that has produced us both.”²⁷⁰ This reminder that the church produces gay and straight Christians is ultimately a confrontation of Modern liberalism’s assumption that we are what we do. For Hauerwas, who we are is what has been done to us by the God who is reconciling all things through Jesus Christ. That this God has made us a people is a more important disclosure than coming out of any closet ever could be. It would seem that the church that can hold to this truth will be the only one capable of actually answering the question about same-sex marriage in the church, though there’s little empirical evidence that this church exists in the United States.

Ultimately, Hauerwas appears to relish the church’s debate around same-sex marriage because gay Christians have served a prophetic role in calling the church back to its fundamental witness in and through marriage. While it is unclear if Hauerwas would claim that this witness would include these gay prophets, the importance of their role and presence cannot be dismissed. At the very least, churches who would cast out their gay members or put them through psychologically destructive practices such as “sexual orientation reassignment” should be ashamed of themselves not only for the harm they do, but for the ways they miss the prophetic call to re-examine marriage for gay and straight, alike.

SINGLENESSE

Given Hauerwas’ emphasis on the church’s mission/witness and how it forms a politic that makes any conversation about marriage and sex intelligible, it is not surprising that the same should hold true for singleness. Where the surprise might arise is in Hauerwas’ assertion that “singleness is a better indication than marriage of the church’s self-understanding.”²⁷¹ If one

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 51.

²⁷¹ “Sex in Public,” *HR*, 498.

does find this assertion surprising, it is likely a reflection on how pernicious and pervasive the forces of Modern life can be. As Hauerwas writes, “the church [today] is prone, for apologetic reasons, to simply underwrite the broad assumption that marriage is a natural and primary context in which to ‘locate’ sex. Thus, most Christians assume that marriage is the first mode of sexual life and that the single therefore must justify his or her mode of life rather than vice versa.”²⁷² Contrast this, however, to Hauerwas’ articulation of “modes of life” in the early church:

The early church’s legitimation of singleness as a form of life symbolized the necessity of the church to grow through witness and conversion. Singleness was legitimate, not because sex was thought to be a particularly questionable activity, but because the mission of the church was such that ‘between the times’ the church required those who were capable of complete service to the Kingdom. And we must remember that the ‘sacrifice’ made by the single is not that of ‘giving up sex,’ but the much more significant sacrifice of giving up heirs. There can be no more radical act than this, as it is the clearest institutional expression that one’s future is not guaranteed by the family, but by the church.²⁷³

Hauerwas’ emphasis on how singleness (and marriage) “symbolized” the life of the church is a reminder that “Christians must learn to think about our sexual lives as members of a community. We are called to be of service to one another as single and as married.”²⁷⁴ It is, as the subsection on family will explain most clearly, the church that is the primary, determinative community on the life of a Christian and *not* the family. This is why singles are capable of not, primarily, giving up sex, but heirs in their singleness.

Of course, Hauerwas is aware that singleness is almost esteemed in our culture as much as marriage. Culturally speaking, marriage is a voluntary institution one enters into in order to find self-fulfillment, while singleness symbolizes freedom and autonomy. It is important to note

²⁷² Ibid., 497.

²⁷³ Ibid., 498. See also: Stanley Hauerwas, “Sexing the Ministry” in *Without Apology: Sermons for Christ’s Church* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013), 165-166.

²⁷⁴ *AC*, 130.

that marriage and singleness does not do symbolizing work only in the church, but also in Modern liberal cultures, which is to say that the assertion that both marriage and singleness are only made intelligible by a community and narrative is true for whatever the community and narrative. Yet, to the degree that Modern liberalism is ultimately a culture of death, it should not surprise us that “in our culture, singleness too easily becomes the way we learn to name loneliness as independence and freedom. In contrast singleness in the church must become the occasion for friendship as we know we are linked by a communion that allows our difference to become the occasion for recognition of the other as other.”²⁷⁵

For Hauerwas, the confrontation of loneliness in singlehood—which is not to be dismissed easily, for it is truly a profound and painful experience for many—is not remedied in marriage. Indeed, married people often find themselves quite lonely, together. Rather, it is in friendship that pain and suffering are met with presence. Hauerwas illustrates this point in an essay on medicine by recounting a time in his early teen years when a friend’s mother committed suicide. He candidly recounts his immediate feelings upon hearing Bob’s request that he come over.

I did not want to go to see him or confront a reality like that. I had not yet learned the desperation hidden under our everyday routines and I did not want to learn of it. Moreover, I did not want to go because I knew there was nothing I could do or say to make things even appear better than they were. Finally, I did not want to go because I did not want to be close to anyone who had been touched by such a tragedy.²⁷⁶

Even still, like Job’s friends (whom Hauerwas references prior to his telling his personal story), Hauerwas went to his friend and over time has come to understand that “God granted me the marvelous privilege of being a presence in the face of profound pain and suffering even when I

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 129-130.

²⁷⁶ “Salvation and Health: Why Medicine Needs the Church,” *HR*, 540.

did not appreciate the significance of being present.”²⁷⁷ Friendship is the name of the gift of community given to single and married, alike. Neither can exist without this gift if their singleness or marriage is to be fruitful and able to be received as a gift. The pain of singleness—which is mitigated considerably when one remembers that one’s singleness is not to be viewed as the lack of a partner, but rather as the fullest presentation of the Kingdom—is still pain and “to be in pain means we need help, that we are vulnerable to the interests of others, that we are not in control of our destiny.”²⁷⁸ Friendship, then, is no temporary panacea until the right mate comes along, but rather is intentionally placing one’s vulnerability into the hands of those who will still hold one’s primary interests as their own. It is accepting this lack of control over destiny—accepting life’s contingencies—and, instead, learning to receive our destiny as gift through the gifts of friends.

The combined emphasis on lack of heirs and a sure destiny in Jesus Christ helps reveal the politics that makes singleness intelligible for Christians. As Hauerwas writes, “singleness reminds the church we grow not through biological ascription but through witness and hospitality to the stranger—who often turns out to be our biological child. As Christians we believe that every Christian in one generation might be called to singleness, yet God will create the church anew.”²⁷⁹ There may be no more significant point Hauerwas makes about sex, marriage, singleness, and the family than that they are functionally irrelevant to the growth of the church. Instead, their relevance is found in their witnessing to God’s redemptive work, put on display in the life of the church, so that through their witnessing—be it as single or married—God creates the church anew for each generation.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 541.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 550.

²⁷⁹ *AC*, 128.

SEX, GENERALLY UNDERSTOOD

As noted above, Hauerwas does not understand sex to be intelligible to Christians apart from the covenant of marriage. Whether that covenant can be extended for same-sex couples is a topic for greater scrutiny in the next chapter. Indeed, so firm is Hauerwas' position that to name a subsection "Sex, Generally Understood" risks maligning his contribution. However, maybe in concession to the broader ethos of Modern liberalism, it is worth exploring what Hauerwas has tried to say about sex, generally. As we do so, though, it will become apparent that "generally" more often than not names a certain, unspoken polity that is foreign to the Church and, when enacted, detrimental to the formation of Christian character and the Church's witness. Even still, such an engagement permits that which goes unspoken to be unearthed and better analyzed for either its contributions or deficiencies.

To begin, Hauerwas views the contemporary approach to sex as "the last sacrament, that is, it is assumed some meaning or reality will result from sexual behavior no matter what intentions you bring to the act."²⁸⁰ This (accidental) sacramental approach to sex in culture is a theme he expands in his series of conversations with Brian Brock as recorded in *Beginnings: Interrogating Hauerwas*. Here, he says that sex "is the one place where people think in terms of the Eucharistic formula—*ex opere operato*—in the sense that if they do it, they believe the act itself will necessarily be constitutive of meaning. And that doesn't work. That just doesn't work. The question is what it means to be in a relationship where our bodies are not off limits for each other."²⁸¹ *Ex opere operato* literally means "from the work performed" and signals that the efficacy of the eucharist is not found in the minister nor recipient, but that the elements contain an agency of themselves. The alternative is *ex opere operantis*, meaning "from the agent's

²⁸⁰ *WA*, 164.

²⁸¹ *BIH*, 192.

activity.” So, sex has meaning (to a degree) as we make that meaning by making our bodies available (i.e., not off limits) to one another, but does not have an agency/meaning in and of itself. That the cultural view of sex has slowly evolved to take on a eucharistic formula would be ironic, if it was not so tragic. The “sexual revolution” was begun, at least in part, to free individuals from traditional entrapments like the sacraments, but has resulted in a new “sacrament” of wanting efficacy and meaning.

Most of what Hauerwas wants to say about sex, generally, is that such a thing is not possible—and often with traumatic consequences. For example, he cites clergy sex abuse as deriving less from lust than from loneliness and the Church’s failed commitment to speak truthfully to one another. Yet without this broader framework, such misguided and sinful actions on the part of ministers and priests only finds intelligibility as “abuse of power.”²⁸² While extra-marital affairs and clergy sexual manipulation of congregants is most certainly an “abuse of power,” such language fails to note the deficiencies at work in congregational life that permit and even gives rise to such abuses. As such, mere deontological assertions against such abuse are unlikely to stem the tide of such misconduct. Instead, Hauerwas recommends that “our lives must be surrounded by richer forms of life than sex itself. For example, if the church is a community committed to speaking the truth to one another, that should make a difference for how we relate sexually. To engage in sex outside of marriage involves secrecy. And secrecy is the breeding ground of the lie.”²⁸³ When sex is viewed generally and apart from other disciplines of the church like truth-telling and friendship, it will latch onto a cultural view “in which sex is used as entertainment or as a desperate way to overwhelm our loneliness.”²⁸⁴

²⁸² Cf. “Sexing the Ministry,” *WA*, 159-162.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

While the above example noted ways in which focusing on sex, as a thing unto itself, is primarily and potentially harmful to individuals (especially victims of “abuse of power”), such a view also erodes the overall efficacy and faithfulness of the Church’s witness. This is especially true of denominations that have undertaken a decades-long debate of “sexuality,” even as much more pressing issues—income inequality, war, racism, violence—are places of despair from which their victims look to the Church for some hope, only to find the Church “consumed by debates about sexual conduct. That we are captivated by issues surrounding something called ‘sexuality’ is an indication of the captivity of the church to money, class, and liberal political arrangements. Nothing makes such captivity more apparent than the relegation of the church to the ‘private.’ Sex becomes *the* issue before the church because sex constitutes the realm of the ‘private.’”²⁸⁵ For Hauerwas, so much of the contemporary Church’s debates around human sexuality are a result of capitulation to Modern, liberal sensibilities that have left such discussions to the purview of the Church. To be sure, the Church ought to speak on these matters, but only—from Hauerwas’ perspective—as part of the Church’s broader ethic (narrative, community, and character) as an alternative to the world. When the Church accepts the *a priori* assumptions of Modern, liberal society, it cannot be a witness to such a society; or, rather, it’s witness merely reflects such a society back to itself rather than giving it an alternative, contrastive polity by which to live.

And so, “Sex, Generally Understood” is a bad idea if Christians are to present marriage (even same-sex marriage), singleness, family, and the rest as the embodied witness to an alternative polity. It is a bad idea for individual practitioners who may be led into place of “abuse of power,” or even lesser harms like “entertainment” or the staving off of loneliness, and it is a

²⁸⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, “Ordinary Time: A Tribute to Rowan Williams,” in *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 209.

bad idea for the Church's overall witness. The only advantage to addressing the topic as such is to compel the Christian back into a broader discussion about what sort of narrative, community, and character can make sex intelligible. To that conversation, then, let us return.

CHILDREN AND FAMILY

“The first enemy of the family is the church.”²⁸⁶ So begins Hauerwas at maybe his most polemical/prophetic. Yet behind the hard, quippy quotation rests a more constructive proposal that yearns to save the family from itself. For while Hauerwas may claim that the church is an enemy to the family, and the first enemy, it is not its greatest enemy. That distinction belongs to the family itself.

Continuing the insights noted above, specifically that all matters of marriage, sex, singleness and now family are only intelligible in a particular polity, Hauerwas begins by deconstructing the cultural politics that form the family. At first, he posits the “economic marginalization of the family”²⁸⁷ via Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. According to Hauerwas, “Smith’s aim was to articulate the philosophical presuppositions and institutional arrangements necessary for the creation of societies in which the poorest man of a clan could survive without need for the regard of the chieftain.”²⁸⁸ Under such a cultural presupposition, “the family would still exist, but it would increasingly be understood as but another instance of exchange relation.”²⁸⁹ He then concludes his summary thusly: “the whole point of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was to show how the weakening of familial ties would increase the necessity of sympathy between strangers and result in cooperative forms of behavior that had not

²⁸⁶ *AC*, 127.

²⁸⁷ “Radical Hope,” *HR*, 507.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 508.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 508.

previously been realized.”²⁹⁰ Of course, when one considers that familial ties—and, more broadly, kinship and clans—had provided the basis for so much war, death, and destruction (as even the Christian Old Testament bears witness to), increasing “sympathy between strangers” has its appeal. The unintended consequence, however, is that family is reduced to “the place from which we receive and learn affection.”²⁹¹ While affection is good, and certainly needs to be learned, the moral function of the family is much greater than this. We will address shortly what Hauerwas believes to be this function, but first he must clear up another cultural politic: “The Romantic Idealization of the Family.”²⁹²

Prior to the revolution introduced by Smith, “the strength of the family had been its social, economic, and political significance.”²⁹³ However, with capitalism taking over the economic and political functions of human relationships, only the social function remains. All of the energy that used to be expended across these three functions are now exerted solely on the social function, resulting in an “idealized account of the family.”²⁹⁴ As Hauerwas explains,

In a world of strangers, we cling to the family as the one place that supplies us with relationships that we have not chosen. As a set of relationships that are a ‘given’ rather than ones we can choose to opt into or out of, family relationships at least seem to promise to give our lives, if not purpose, at least an ‘anchor.’ The problem, however, is that the family is generally unable to bear the burden of such intense psychological and moral expectations.²⁹⁵

The family suffers as the social network that makes up the determinative force in an individual’s life is narrowed and narrowed until it is just the family. The psychological intensity of such a social unit is a theme Hauerwas returns to in a few different places. For example, in responding

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 508.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 510.

²⁹² Ibid., 510-511.

²⁹³ Ibid., 510.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 510.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 510.

to Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*—in which “Nisbet observed that while the family continues to be celebrated from pulpit and rostrum as indispensable to the economy and the state, in point of fact it is indispensable to neither.”²⁹⁶—Hauerwas notes “that people do not live together merely to be together but to do something together... [and] that without any concrete perceived functions it is unlikely the family can even continue to exert any strong psychological influence. Alternatively, in the absence of any function, the family becomes psychologically too intense, for family members cannot allow themselves psychological distance from one another; otherwise they have no reason for being.”²⁹⁷ As a result, “when families exist for no reason other than their own existence, they become quasi-churches, which ask sacrifices far too great and for insufficient reasons.”²⁹⁸

Of course, the idea that the family is an *ecclesia domestica* is part of the church's witness, but this is not what Hauerwas has in mind when he refers to the family, under the pressure of the romantic idealization of the family, as a “quasi-church.” “Idol” is probably a much better word for what Hauerwas has in mind, for it is idols that ask us for sacrifices that the idol, itself, could not and could never make. That the family has been rendered a quasi-church/idol is a result of a liberal narrative that assume for each individual “it is his or her task to make the family as much as possible a voluntary institution—I can choose who to marry and when—as well as whether to stay married.”²⁹⁹ In an ironic twist, this same liberal narrative also constructs the church as another “voluntary institution” that exists for the sentimental self-fulfillment of each individual who opts to engage with it. As Hauerwas writes elsewhere, “The ecclesiology of most of the

²⁹⁶ *AC*, 122.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

more liberal sexual ethics assumes that the church is a voluntary association that exists for the spiritual enrichment of the individuals composing it.”³⁰⁰

In this regard, both the family and the church are quasi-churches because both are determined by the free choosing of the ideal agent in a liberal society. Of course, once one “voluntarily” chooses a family, it can be difficult “to explain why I do or should feel obligation to parents I did not choose, and perhaps, even to my own children once it is clear they are not the ones I wanted.”³⁰¹ This reminds us that part of having and being in a family is the acceptance that we must embrace the stranger in our midst as an act of our discipleship. Learning to embrace the stranger, however, is not a function that family can teach, but is first the lesson of the church, which is the institution that makes the family intelligible. With this, then, we can better approach Hauerwas’ more constructive appraisal of the family—the church—even if the church is the first enemy of the family.

For Hauerwas, “Christians do not believe marriage and the family exists for themselves, but rather to serve the ends of the more determinative community called church.”³⁰² The church determines families by its story “that we are not our own. We owe our lives to the gift of others. We are called not to be free but to be of service, which may take the form of singleness or marriage. The fact that we find ourselves tied to people we did not choose, who may or may not be our biological parents, is but a reminder that our lives are constituted by a narrative of creation and redemption that is not our own making.”³⁰³ One of the primary people that a couple will find themselves tied to is their own children, who are not “theirs” because biology is less determinative than baptism for the Christian family. Or, put more sacramentally, water *is* thicker

³⁰⁰ “Sex in Public,” *HR*, 496.

³⁰¹ *AC*, 129.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 129.

than blood. Of course, Christians often fail to recognize this—under the deluge of liberal assumptions as they are—and so incoherence abounds and “there is no greater sign of the incoherence surrounding the having of children in our culture than the pagan assumption that biology makes children ‘ours.’”³⁰⁴ Children are not be received as payment for the procreative task done well, but as the stranger, who must be received as the gift. Of course, parents have more than a little natural affection for their children, but even this should be capitalized upon to better help train their Christian character by being the embodiment of the goodness that comes when the stranger is embraced.

As was already noted in the subsection on “Marriage” above, openness to children is no mere deontological rule over a Christian couple’s life, but of essence with the witness that marriage is supposed to provide to the world. For Hauerwas, “marriage and procreation are the symbols of the church’s understand that the struggle will be long and arduous. For Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope, in spite of the considerable evidence to the contrary, that God has not abandoned this world.”³⁰⁵ Contrary to the assumption that the church grows through faithful people having faithful children, Christians have confidence in God, not their children—or their children’s presumed faith. This is the case because “we cannot be assured that our children will share our mission. For they, too, must be converted if they are to be followers of the way.”³⁰⁶ This act of conversion is not the exclusive purview of the parents, however, as each child is to be determined by the community of the church over the community of the family. Or, if it is under the exclusive purview of parents, then it is important to remember that “Christians, single and married, are parents. ‘Parent’ names an

³⁰⁴ “Radical Hope,” *HR*, 515.

³⁰⁵ “Sex in Public,” *HR*, 499.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 499.

office of the Christian community that everyone in the community is expected faithfully to fulfill.”³⁰⁷ The role of biology in the family continues to ever-dwindle when we further remember that “all parenting is a form of adoption, and how even ‘childless marriages’ in the Christian community must provide space for children.”³⁰⁸ This reminder that even childless couples³⁰⁹ are still “parents” and that they make vows at each child’s baptism to be part of the community that raises that child in the faith should come as a soothing balm for those couples who struggle with fertility. Once again, as we saw when singleness was confronted by friendship, we find that the friendship of the Christian community relativizes and mitigates some of the pains of living in a broken world, which is to say a world in which natural biological functions—womb, sperm, ovum, and so on—do not yield the gifts they were designed to partner with God in creating.

It is culturally sentimental—and a sentiment maybe more frequently uttered in churches—that “children are a blessing.” This is true, but for reasons that extend well beyond mere sentiment. For Hauerwas, the greatest evidence of the blessing of children is found in the lives of children with cognitive disabilities and their families, the subtopic to which we turn now.

CHILDREN WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

A foray into the specific topic of children with cognitive disabilities may appear an odd continuation of the previous conversation about family and children, but for Hauerwas the two are inextricably linked, both in the challenges the Modern liberalism creates and the constructive

³⁰⁷ “Radical Hope,” *HR*, 515.

³⁰⁸ *BH*, 49.

³⁰⁹ I write this as much as an objective appraisal of Hauerwas’ theological ethics as I do a pastoral self-reminder because my wife and I have our own fertility troubles, which could have been damning in our marriage if it were not for our belief and trust in what Hauerwas says is true.

opportunities for better understanding family and children through the lens of those with cognitive disabilities. The broken assumption of Modern liberalism, with its emphasis on freedom, autonomy, self-possession, and individualism, makes the decision to have children unintelligible. Or, rather, children can only be intelligible as a “decision.” As Hauerwas notes, “Even though we think we have and should exercise the physical and moral freedom to have children we have no reason, no story, which says why we should exercise this freedom to decide to have children. We thus have children because they are ‘fun’ or because we want to continue the family name; or because our parents or society expect us to have children; or because it just seems to be something that people ought to do.”³¹⁰ Following the reasoning behind his critique of the “economic marginalization of the family” outlined above, children are inevitably viewed as the “product” of a couple’s copulation and thus their possession. Within this view is the seeds of corruption for “just to the extent that we must choose our children we feel that we must also place a demand on them, namely, that they be perfect”³¹¹ because “after all, who wants to go to all the trouble that children represent for an inferior product.”³¹² Without a robust enough narrative of why to have children at all, the reasons for having a child with cognitive disabilities are all the more inexplicable.

Against this backdrop, those with cognitive disabilities assume a prophetlike call on all people, especially Christians who have been trained to be attentive to the prophets in their midst. As Hauerwas notes, “retarded [sic]³¹³ children destroy our plans and fantasies... as they remind

³¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas with Richard Bondi and David B. Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations Into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 150.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 150.

³¹³ As a sign of the times in which Hauerwas wrote most of his writing on this topic, he uses the then-acceptable term “retarded” (and its other various forms). The challenge in quoting him is to do so honestly and without necessarily having to disrupt the flow of his thinking with either multiple, bracketed [sic]s or the bracketed replacement of “retarded” with “[those with cognitive disabilities].” As such, the decision has been made to quote

us that the plans we have for our children may not be commensurate with the purpose for which we have children at all.”³¹⁴ Maintaining the internal coherence of his broader argument that children exist as a form of witness to the Kingdom of God, Hauerwas reminds us that this is still as true for those with cognitive disabilities—and even truer, as they provide their prophetic function in their very being.

Much of the challenge around having children with cognitive disabilities comes from Christian’s lack of understanding around suffering and the perpetuation of Modern liberalism’s assumptions around self-possession. Hauerwas provides three descriptions of suffering that are important for understanding his argument:

- “Suffering names those aspects of our lives that we undergo and that have a particularly negative sense.”³¹⁵
- “Suffering also carries a sense of ‘surdsness’: it denotes those frustrations for which we can give no satisfying explanation and that we cannot make serve some wider end. Suffering thus names a sense of brute power that does violence to our best laid plans.”³¹⁶
- “It is interesting that we also use ‘suffer’ in an active sense of bearing with, permitting, or enduring.”³¹⁷

The first challenge is to understand the sort of suffering that is taking place for our response to it will vary based upon this. To the first of these descriptions, Hauerwas reminds us that within the field of medicine “disease descriptions and remedies are relative to a society’s values and needs. Thus, ‘retardation’ might not ‘exist’ in a society that values cooperation more than competition

him as he wrote with the caveat that better, more sensitive, and more appropriate language has since been developed and deployed.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

³¹⁵ “Should Suffering Be Eliminated? What the Retarded Have to Teach Us,” *HR*, 562.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 562.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 562.

and ambition.”³¹⁸ This is to say that evaluations of “negative” and “positive” are not morally neutral, but rather reveal a particular politic of a particular community; in our contemporary society that community would go by the name Modern liberalism. To the second of these descriptions, Hauerwas notes that our “best laid plans” are often just an extension of our trying to live out our self-possession, which forms the basis for our identity, especially in the polity of Modern liberalism. As a corrective, Hauerwas reminds us that “Our identity, far from deriving from our self-possession or our self-control, comes from being ‘depossessed’ of those powers whose promise is only illusory.”³¹⁹ It is in the third description that a more positive evaluation of suffering is possible because “we suffer because we are incomplete beings who depend on one another for our existence.”³²⁰ It is this form of suffering where those with cognitive disabilities can best provide their prophetic function in church and society, alike, because they train those who are “normal” how to be present in another’s suffering, not in a productive, but in a relational way. This is a challenge because

Too often we seek to do something rather than first simply learn how to be with, to be present to, the sufferer in his or her loneliness. We especially fear, if not dislike, those whose suffering is the kind for which we can do nothing. The retarded, therefore, are particularly troubling for us. Even if they do not suffer by being retarded, they are certainly people in need. Even worse, they do not try to hide their needs. They are not self-sufficient, they are not self-possessed, they are in need. Even more, they do not evidence the proper shame for being so. They simply assume that they are what they are and they need to provide no justification for being such.³²¹

What those with cognitive disabilities, then, provide us is an opportunity to understand the sort of people we must be if we are to be the sort of people who can create communities that support and sustain those with a mental disability. For, to be sure, we know how violent and

³¹⁸ Ibid., 558.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 566.

³²⁰ Ibid., 565.

³²¹ Ibid., 572.

dangerous the world can be for those with a disability, but such knowledge ought to be the basis for our challenging and changing the nature of the world and not the nature of those so disabled. As Hauerwas notes, “If justice comes to mean the elimination of the victim of injustice rather than the cause of injustice, we stand the risk of creating admittedly a less troubled but deeply unjust world.”³²²

The existence and continual needs of those with cognitive disabilities is a part of the church’s witness to the world that “The Christian community is formed by the conviction that the power of this world is not the determining sway of our existence, but rather it is the power we find in the cross of Jesus Christ.”³²³ All witness—be it in sex, marriage, singleness, children, and those with cognitive disabilities—must find its way back to the cross of Jesus Christ if it is to be a Christian witness. The mere creation of a more just society, which always contains within it the temptation to eliminate the victims of injustice rather than the cause of injustice, is not the Christian goal of witness. And it is nothing less than the cross of Jesus Christ that those with cognitive disabilities bring the people of God back to because the cross reveals who God is and how God is seen in who those with cognitive disabilities are. “God’s face is the face of the retarded; God’s body is the body of the retarded; God’s being is that of the retarded. For the God we Christians must learn to worship is not a god of self-sufficient power, a god who is self-possession needs no one; rather, ours is a God who needs a people, who needs a son. Absoluteness of being or power is not a work of the God we have come to know through the cross of Christ.”³²⁴

³²² *Ibid.*, 568-569.

³²³ *TT*, 151.

³²⁴ “Should Suffering Be Eliminated?,” *HR*, 574-575.

Far from being an odd aside in a conversation on marriage, sex, singleness, and the family, the having and raising of children with cognitive disabilities is yet another—and maybe more poignant—reminder of the task of witnessing implicit in the having of any and all children. To the degree that those with cognitive disabilities are not the children we would wish to have, we are reminded that “we do not so much choose them, as we discover them as gifts that are not of our making.”³²⁵ The capacity to accept and love all children trains within the church the skill necessary to accept and love the stranger, who may just become a brother or sister in the faith, and through whom the church’s growth and witness will continue. All children are an opportunity to witness and all witness forms and re-forms our character in Christ, teaching us to live depossessed lives and find our hope in the God we encounter on the cross. All children remind us of our intrinsic need of others and embody a shameless requesting and receiving of having these needs met. Children are, indeed, a blessing and one that the church cannot afford to miss, which is why every Christian holds the office of “parent” in the church through the baptism of each child. Other narratives—Modern and/or Romantic—are insufficient for providing a thick enough narrative and sustainable enough practices for having children, especially those with cognitive disabilities, and thus the church should be better able to see and pursue their vocation of witness as counteracting these broken narratives.

ABORTION

That abortion is included in a chapter on Hauerwas’ theological ethics for marriage and sex may already reveal much of what Hauerwas believes about abortion. It is, at any rate, far from a neutral or necessary inclusion. Indeed, it is oft-argued—both within the church and the broader culture—that the ethics that attend to abortion are either that of murder/the justified

³²⁵ *TT*, 150.

taking of life or of individual agency/rights. The argument goes that though pregnancy is obviously the result of sex, abortion of a pregnancy is not necessarily a matter of sexual ethics. Thus, the inclusion of this subsection is already a witness against this line of thinking that deserves to be substantiated if Hauerwas is to be understood at all.

That abortion is included in this chapter should not be terribly surprising, however, if we have already understood Hauerwas on children and family. Children—whether expected or not, wanted or otherwise—maintain their status as the church’s witness to God’s continued providence of God’s creation. There is, for Hauerwas, no means by which this assertion can be repudiated. Of course, anyone versed in the cultural debates around abortion will read a sentence such as the one that just preceded and immediately say, “Is that true, even in instances of rape?” Such an argument finds much of its authority in the emotional, gut-twisting reality of the violence of rape and is meant to make decent people immediately make accommodations for abortion. Hauerwas does not so much disagree as he notes an inherent contradiction at work in this question. As he writes, “if a woman is permitted to abort a fetus resulting from rape, she cannot have a parental relationship to the fetus; yet after a child resulting from rape is born, the woman to whom it is genetically related is defined as the child’s mother. Thus, we describe a woman as having a maternal relationship to a child born after rape, but not to an unborn child.”³²⁶ Hauerwas notes this to begin exploring the incomprehensible assumptions around children in a Modern, liberal society.³²⁷

³²⁶ *CC*, 204.

³²⁷ I might add my own version of this, particular to an American context, and ask politicians in support of ending abortion why the unborn fetus is *not* a citizen of the United States until her birth. If she were a citizen, she could receive a social security number upon knowledge of conception. Politicians who fight for the legal status of the unborn when discussing abortion, but do *not* fight for that status in every instance betray a similar misgiving as the one Hauerwas notes about victims of rape and their maternal (or lack thereof) relationship to the unborn child within them.

Whereas many interlocutors might seize upon this contradiction as proof that their position is therefore more reliable or trustworthy, Hauerwas points us back to the reminder that “parent” is an office that every Christian holds. This statement is not given with the intention of robbing the woman who actually carries the child in her womb of the uniqueness of that bond and relationship, but rather to draw the community into the life of the child and the child into the life of the community. It is only when this necessary step has occurred that any statement about aborting or not aborting can be made intelligible. Hauerwas does not, then, so much answer the question about rape as he tries to ask a better question and allow the church to answer that question. Evidence of his ambivalence—ambivalence about the specific decision and not about the role of the community in the life of the child and vice versa—is his statement that abortion is “a morally unhappy practice,”³²⁸ but that “there may well be circumstances when abortions are morally permissible if still morally tragic.”³²⁹ It is likely that even this caveat—or, pessimistically-viewed, this side-stepping of the question—will leave some readers dissatisfied. To them I can only offer a Hauerwasian sort of challenge. Presuming that those who would want a more full-throated declaration that abortion is morally permissible in the instances of rape would not go so far as to say they are morally necessary or required—that is, they would ultimately defer to the decision of the woman who was raped and is now pregnant—Hauerwas would ask something akin to “what sort of narrative and community must be necessary for a raped woman who finds herself pregnant from the rape to freely choose, under no coercion from anyone else and following the guidance on her own conscience, to keep the child?” Hauerwas would, I think, ask such a question (he asks similar questions about singles, women who stay in bad marriages, having children with cognitive disabilities, etc.) because his goal is to reveal the

³²⁸ Ibid., 197.

³²⁹ Ibid., 197.

sort of community necessary to have and sustain new life as a gift from God and *not* to deontologically rule in this manner or that.

That Hauerwas is interested in such communities is his way of directly confronting the issue of abortion, though to untrained eyes it may very much look like just changing the topic. Yet, for Hauerwas, this is a direct confrontation because he contends that our current stance (or stances) on abortion is very much community-rooted and community-dependent. He makes this particular point both philosophically and interpersonally. On the philosophical spectrum, Hauerwas approaches abortion via Alasdair MacIntyre, who provides three different positions³³⁰ on abortion, with each one contradicting the other. Hauerwas writes, “MacIntyre suggests the interesting thing about these arguments is that each of the protagonists reaches his conclusion by valid forms of inferences, yet there is no agreement about which premises are the right starting points.”³³¹ That the right starting points cannot be found is proof that these sentiments—and, as we will see, they may be nothing more than sentiments at this point—“are ‘fragments’ of past moral positions”³³² because “they have been torn from the social and intellectual contexts in which they gained their original intelligibility and from which they derive such force and validity

³³⁰ The positions are presented thusly (in *CC*, 215):

A: Everybody has certain rights over their own person, including their own body. It follows from the nature of these rights that at the stage when the embryo is essentially part of the mother’s body, the mother has a right to make her uncoerced decision on whether she will have an abortion or not. Therefore each pregnant woman ought to decide and ought to be allowed to decide for herself what she will do in the light of her own moral views.

B: I cannot, if I will to be alive, consistently will that my mother should have had an abortion when she was pregnant with me, except if it had been certain that the embryo was dead or gravely damaged. But if I cannot consistently will this in my own case, how can I consistently deny to others the right to life I claim for myself? I would break the so-called Golden Rule unless I denied that a mother has in general a right to abortion. I am not of course thereby committed to the view that abortion ought to be legally prohibited.

C: Murder is wrong, prohibited by natural and divine law. Murder is the taking of innocent life. An embryo is an identifiable individual differing from a new-born infant only in being at an earlier stage on the long road to adult capacities. If infanticide is murder, as it is, then abortion is murder. So abortion is not only morally wrong, but ought to be legally prohibited.

These three positions are quoted from: Alasdair MacIntyre, “How to Identify Ethical Principles,” *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*, I (Washington, D.C.: DHEW Publication No. (OS) 78-0013, 1978), article 10, pp. 9-10.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

³³² *Ibid.*, 215.

as they continue to possess.”³³³ That the broader culture largely argues this topic from de-contextualized fragments means “We are thus a society that may be in the unhappy position of being founded upon a moral contradiction.”³³⁴ Thus, Hauerwas demonstrates that the cultural debate on abortion is very much centered on community artifacts from previous times.

On the interpersonal level, Hauerwas notes that while there are countless books and articles on the morality of abortion, “the way people decide to have or not to have an abortion rarely seems to involve the issues discussed in those articles. [...] Rather, the decision seems to turn primarily on the quality of the relationship (or lack of relationship) between the couple.”³³⁵ The interpersonal insight is that the decision to have an abortion (or not) is hinged upon the fitness of the relationship with the male partner, which demonstrates—again—that all discussion on abortion is ultimately a discussion about community. This remains true whether we zoom out and view “community” as large, abstract, philosophical entities or focus in on just one woman and one man in one relationship. Some aspect of community is always present in the conversation, though rarely is it present in the debates about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of abortion as an act. This is because no act, as a general statement, is intelligible apart from a community with a thick narrative. That abortion is such an oft-raging fire of discord is only a result of competing, contradictory narratives at work in, especially, the American context.

From here, then, it is not surprising to see Hauerwas turn his attention to the nature and content of the Christian community. Doing so, however, is rare in these debates because Christians labor under the assumption that they must remove their stance from the narrative and

³³³ Ibid., 215.

³³⁴ Ibid., 216.

³³⁵ Ibid., 199.

community that makes the stance intelligible in order for it to be accepted as a public policy³³⁶. “As a result the Christian prohibition of abortion appears as an irrational prejudice of religious people who cannot argue it on a secular, rational basis.”³³⁷ As a corrective to this apologetic impulse, in which the church gives up the very best it has to offer the world, Hauerwas writes, “If we are to serve our society well, and on our own terms, our first task must be to address ourselves by articulating for Christians why abortion can never be regarded as morally indifferent for us. Only by doing this can we witness to our society what kind of people and what kind of society is required if abortion is to be excluded.”³³⁸ The greatest value the church has to offer a debate about abortion is not when or where life begins, but to be “a community whose constitution is nothing less than the story of God’s promise to [hu]mankind through the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus.”³³⁹ How this constitution bears out on a topic like abortion can occur in any number of ways, though Hauerwas specifies that “Jews and Christians are taught to respect life, not as an end in itself, but as a gift created by God. Thus life is respected because all life serves God in its way.”³⁴⁰ Furthermore, the eschatological character of the community, which was so important in how Hauerwas addresses marriage and understands children and family, also means that “Christians believe that we have the time in this existence to care for new life, especially as such life is dependent and vulnerable, because it is not our task to rule this world or to ‘make our mark on history.’”³⁴¹ Additionally, the task of having and raising children participates in the Christian’s on-going sanctification, especially

the Christian belief, nurtured by the command of Jesus, that we must learn to love one another, that we become more nearly what we were meant to be through the recognition

³³⁶ In addition to the quote above, Hauerwas also writes, “As Christians we have assumed that we were morally and politically required to express our opposition to abortion in terms acceptable in a pluralist society.” (CC, 213).

³³⁷ Ibid., 214.

³³⁸ Ibid., 223.

³³⁹ Ibid., 224.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 225.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 226.

and love of those we did not ‘choose’ to love. Children, the weak, the ill, the dispossessed provide a particularly intense occasion for such love, as they are beings we cannot control. We must love them for what they are rather than what we want or wish them to be, and as a result we discover that we are capable of love.³⁴²

All of these aspects—receiving life as a gift, having time to nurture life, growing in one’s discipleship of Jesus Christ through His command to love one another—are parts of what it means to be constituted by the story of God’s relationship with humanity through Israel and Jesus Christ. That this narrative is distinct and different from the world’s is obvious enough to go without stating, but it does serve as a witness to the world by revealing the morally emaciated center of the world’s ethic. As Hauerwas writes, “From the world’s perspective the birth of a child represents but another drain on our material and psychological resources. Children, after all, take up much of our energy that could be spent on making the world a better place and our society more just. But from the Christian perspective the birth of a child represents nothing less than our commitment that God will not have this world ‘bettered’ by destroying life.”³⁴³

It is unlikely that Hauerwas’ position will placate those who demand a firmly stated and rigorously upheld “position” on the debate—pro-life or pro-choice—but it is also unlikely that the current, binary approach to this debate will yield any new or fruitful results. For this conversation to ever be more than a mere political football, more than an exercise in will-to-power, some form of renewed approach is necessary. For Hauerwas, this approach is no better articulated than in his consistent message that the church is meant to be a witness to the world and that marriage, children, family, and abortion are particularly ripe and intense forms of this witness when enacted faithfully. This is the case because “for Christians, having children or getting married is not a ‘natural’ event but one freighted with the deepest moral and religious

³⁴² Ibid., 227.

³⁴³ Ibid., 228.

significance. Their attitude toward abortion is but an aspect of their conviction that they must be people who are ever ready to welcome children into the world.”³⁴⁴ The symbolic significance of children presents itself in a number of ways, including:

- “...a community’s willingness to encourage children is a sign of its confidence in itself and its people. For children are a community’s sign to the future that life, in spite of its hardship and tedium, is worthwhile.”³⁴⁵
- “...children are symbols of our hope... which sustains us in our day-to-day existence.”³⁴⁶
- “...children signal a community’s confidence because they are bound to change our society and their existence foretells inevitable challenge. Our stories and traditions are never inherited unchanged. Indeed, the very power and truth of a tradition depends on its adaptation by each new generation.”³⁴⁷
- “Thus, children represent a community’s confidence that its tradition is not without merit and is strong enough to meet the challenge of a new generation.”³⁴⁸

That the culture lacks a coherent narrative of why to have children does not mean that children cease to have symbolic value. Instead, their symbolic value is bleak and pessimistic because “when institutionalized and regarded as morally acceptable or at least morally indifferent by society, abortion is an indication that a society is afraid of itself and its children.”³⁴⁹ This remains true whether one is attempting to focus on abortion from a large, abstract, philosophical position or from a more focused, narrowed, interpersonal position because interpersonally abortion is most often a commentary on the nature and security of the relationship that produced the fetus.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 210.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 209.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 209.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 209.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 209.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 209.

In such circumstances, some women may want to assert their agency over their own bodies “as the necessary condition for the freedom of women from male oppression.”³⁵⁰ Though it ultimately turns out that “abortion often is the coercive method men use to free themselves from responsibility to women.”³⁵¹

Abortion is often presented in terms of individual rights, but it always becomes about community encouragement. This has been demonstrated as true for the culture, but also exists as a convicting truth for the church, when the church attempts individualistic efforts only to betray its own communal understanding. As Hauerwas writes, “many parents, including Catholics, encourage their unmarried daughters to get an abortion rather than ‘ruin’ their lives by a public acknowledgement of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Ironically, such an attitude assumes that individual sexual conduct is more significant than a community’s willingness to receive its children.”³⁵² Hauerwas’ aside of “including Catholics” is more than a Protestant swipe at the Roman Catholic Church, but a reminder that all Christians are going to witness to God and God’s provision in and through their reception of children. Thus, to worry about a child ruining a life is to make a statement about the impotency or ambivalence of God in the life of that child and the rest of the world. Importantly, this quote brings the conversation back around to the major theme of this chapter, marital and sex ethics, and helps justify abortion’s inclusion in this chapter. For, ultimately, Hauerwas contends that “the question should be what kind of attitude should we have toward the having of children and what kind of sexual behavior is most appropriate to that attitude.”³⁵³ The idea of starting with a larger witness and working backward

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 201.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 201.

³⁵² Ibid., 208.

³⁵³ Ibid., 207.

to a particular practice is as fine of a summary of Hauerwas' theological ethics on sex and marriage as one can have.

CONCEPTION

Hauerwas' emphasis on openness to children in marriage elevates issues around conception to greater heights than if his marital ethic were different (e.g., for unitive purpose only). Of course, that we can speak of "issues around conception" is, itself, a reflection more of certain medical advancements than it is of Hauerwas' theological ethics, properly speaking. Issues of *in vitro* fertilization, surrogacy, even cloning (for we may be far closer to a couple opting to clone one of its members instead of pursuing uterine pregnancy than we might realize) are all legitimate possibilities and therefore topics for consideration within a marital and sex ethic, especially as Hauerwas has presented it. While chapter five will directly address infertility, we must understand Hauerwas' general approach as a necessary antecedent to that chapter.

As might be expected, narrative, community, and character play a significant role in how Hauerwas addresses the various manifestations of conception. Yet the origin and root of much of what he has to say begins in that subset of character previously described as "vision." This is revealed in a particularly poignant manner in his 1977 essay, "The Demands and Limits of Care: On the Moral Dilemma of Neonatal Intensive Care."³⁵⁴ In this early essay, written at a time when Hauerwas was as much philosopher and theologian (and, therefore, written with no explicit reference to the Christian narrative or community), he addresses the eponymous challenge by turning to vision. As he writes, "Ethical reflection, therefore, cannot concern itself exclusively with what we ought to do in certain dilemmas. It must be equally concerned about how we ought to see and understand what the dilemma is."³⁵⁵ Seeing and understanding the dilemma of

³⁵⁴ "The Demands and Limits of Care: On the Moral Dilemma of Neonatal Intensive Care," *TT*, 169-183.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

neonatal care involves coming to understand a whole host of relevant issues, including the distinctions between care and cure, nature and technology, and health and well-being; the role and limits of parents and doctors; the tension between happiness and suffering; and the prevalence (or lack thereof) of supporting communities in the lives of parents and their children. Incorrect assumptions about any of these topics is bound to result in a broken ethic.

While neonatal care is obviously distinct from issues around conceiving, the framework laid out by Hauerwas as he looks at caring for some of the most vulnerable humans—vulnerable by dint of both their young age *and* medical troubles—helps us understand him better when he turns to more specific topics like *in vitro* fertilization. For example, confusion between “well-being” and “health,” especially in which the former is conflated with the latter, amplifies the level of medical intervention. In an essay (and overall ethic) dedicated to seeing things rightly, we are challenged to accept that “health” may mean merely “minimal physical function”³⁵⁶, as much as we might hate that stingy of a definition. That we may even struggle with that distinction is a result of our presumptions toward happiness, which often involves avoiding suffering. Following Peter Singer, Hauerwas elevates suffering to an ontological level, going so far as to describe newborns as “suffering members of the human species.”³⁵⁷ Simply put, we are human—at least in part—because we suffer a suffering shared by other humans. Appeals to cognition, vocabulary, or physical ability could render some humans subhuman (or, alternatively, might accidentally regard animals as more human than we tend to regard them). Suffering a suffering shared by other humans, however, verifies the humanity of the sufferer. This, of course, makes appeals to seeking happiness potentially suspect, as alleviating all suffering (if such a thing were possible) would render one unhuman. None of this, of course, is meant to be read as

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 181.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 176.

denigrating happiness or esteeming suffering, but rather is noted to help keep each element in a correct perspective. Unchecked happiness, we find, may be the most inhumane thing we could do to ourselves and is certainly no grounds for an ethic of any sort.

Even still, happiness tends to win out over suffering every time, which results in a skewed understanding of care versus cure. For care is possible even when cure isn't. It is possible to care for someone even as they sit on the precipice of death, which is good news insofar as there is no human cure for death. But when our understanding of either cure or care is linked to happiness instead of suffering, we may find that we can achieve neither, which only causes us—ironically enough—to suffer that much more. Once we recognize that suffering and death are unavoidable, we narrate our ethic as one of “letting nature take its course,” but even then, we are unsure because “it is no longer clear what ‘nature’ means in such contexts, as nature has become an extension of our technology’s ability to keep us alive.”³⁵⁸ That we *might* have technology that *could* save a life (or, avoid death) means that we are challenged to accept the roles and limits of that technology. Again, the dichotomy between happiness and suffering (reflected also in cure versus care) will inform *how* we see such medical intervention. For those who can accept that humanness of suffering, and lean into care even without a cure, acceptance of the limits of technology will be that much easier. However, for those who default to happiness/cure, it is nearly impossible to accept the limits of medical intervention.

Yet how does one become a person who can accept the humanness of suffering and trust in care? This is only possible when there are other communities capable of holding a life, even and especially a sick and ailing life, other than the medical community. This point is, for Hauerwas, maybe most important for doctors. As he writes, “The doctor can limit his care—for

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 178.

medicine is the moral art of knowing how to care for the sufferer—*only if he has the assurance that there are other kinds of care present in the community.*”³⁵⁹ While Hauerwas does not name the community of “other kinds of care” in this essay, later writings make it clear that this is the role of the Church.

Again, all of this seems far afield from specific issues of conception—specifically IVF and cloning—but is provided as a foundation for when Hauerwas makes moves to those topics, which he does beginning in 1986 with a testimony before the Ethics Advisory Board of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in regard to *in vitro* fertilization. While acknowledging that he does not expect his approach to be meaningful to the committee—as they are grounded in a particular community known as the Church while the Advisory Board has obligations to a larger, pluralistic constituency—he still presents a manner of reasoning that is important for a distinctly *Christian* ethic on conception. For Hauerwas, IVF has to first be addressed by asking why Christians would desire to be parents in the first place. He proffers some answers— They say it is fun (obviously these have never had children), that it is a manifestation of their love (but then what do you do with your children if the love fades), or it is to please the grandparents or to prevent the couple from being lonely (again less than good reasons, since then the child is being used for some purpose other than him- or herself), or that children are our hope for the future (and then they always disappoint us).”³⁶⁰—and, clearly, just as quickly dismisses them. In his dismissals, however, we can espy the aforementioned appeals to happiness versus suffering, as certainly an infertile couple is likely suffering in their infertility. Of note is that how we see an issue determines the ethics we will bring to it. Contrary these

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 181—emphasis original.

³⁶⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 145.

reasons for seeking to be parents, Hauerwas notes—as was recounted above—that “parent” names an office of the Church and one that every member holds by dint of baptism. He cites the roles of adult doctors, teachers, coaches, etc. as examples of “parenting.” And then explains that “I am not trying to suggest that such activity is the same as responsibility for a particular child, but neither is it irrelevant for how one might understand one’s parental responsibilities.”³⁶¹ Furthermore, IVF ought to be avoided because every Christian is called specifically to the care for orphans and widows, and carries a “responsibility to welcome the stranger among them, [which means] adoption surely seems to be the most appropriate strategy for childlessness.”³⁶² Finally, he makes a logical appeal (more than a theological one) when he says, “Surely amid the immense needs of our society, resources can be better spent than developing techniques to allow a very small percentage of women to experience pregnancy. I simply do not understand why that particular problem should be thought so severe that resources should be given to it before we have, for example, a cheap and effective clotting factor for hemophiliacs.”³⁶³

Yet maybe more significant than the conclusions Hauerwas comes to regarding IVF is the manner in which he comes to these conclusions, a manner that is informed by a thoroughgoing *theological* ethic that is unafraid to stand as a contrastive model to a Modern, liberal way of thinking. Even on a topic, pregnancy/childbirth, that is experienced by Christians and non-Christians alike (and would, therefore and presumably, be more open to a universal, rather than specific, ethic), Hauerwas holds out that Christians parent for different motives and in different ways than their non-Christian counterparts. This is a helpful reminder as we address cloning.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 149.

³⁶² Ibid., 149.

³⁶³ Ibid., 154.

Cloning may seem to rise to the level of absurdity for this dissertation, but caution should be made to not so quickly dismiss what could readily become an option in the future. Indeed, at the time in which Hauerwas first addresses this topic (2013), we were already 17 years past the cloning of Dolly, a sheep born on July 5, 1996. While far from human experimentation—and maybe such experimentation will never occur—the cloning of another mammal certainly leaves the possibility open. Even still, this section on cloning is not given primarily as a caution against potential future realities, but instead to present, once again, Hauerwas’ approach to theological ethics, for Hauerwas (writing with Joel Shuman) argues that “‘Cloning’ is not a new thing for Christians, since we believe we have been made part of Christ’s body.”³⁶⁴ Hauerwas and Shuman, who defined cloning as “the nonsexual reproduction of an organism using the genetic material of another organism,”³⁶⁵ argue that ‘Christians have for nearly two thousand years been about the business of nonsexually reproducing the one body that matters most, and indeed the only one that must be reproduced in pursuit of the human good, and that is Christ’s body.’³⁶⁶ At work behind the efforts to pursue cloning is, unsurprisingly, a desire for the scientific-medical community to help alleviate/avoid human suffering. When cloning is viewed through the lens of suffering, then the only possible resulting ethic can be summarized thusly: “human cloning is wrong because it violates the uniqueness and the autonomy of the individual, but that cloning animals is a fundamentally good thing insofar as it contributes to the elimination of human suffering.”³⁶⁷ “Autonomy of the individual” names the assumptions of Modernity, as does the exploitation of animals for the sake of alleviating human suffering. Yet for Christians who do not fear suffering because they follow a Lord who was crucified, the justifications for cloning of any

³⁶⁴ “Cloning the Human Body, *AE*, 193-194.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

sort quickly run thin. This is the practical and real difference Christ makes and learning to view certain questions—be they about infertility treatments or cloning—correctly is the difference Hauerwas makes in Christian theology and ethics.

CONCLUSION

As we saw in the first chapter, Hauerwas' theological ethics is a continued, on-going, and never-ending conversation between narrative, community, and character. The Church names the community formed by the Holy Spirit, which is sustained by this same Spirit in its liturgy and interpretive practices, which gives it a story. Right interpretation, however, is only possible to the degree that each Christian has been formed with the right character by the Church's practices, especially the Eucharist. The Church lives as a contrastive model to the world and presents salvation to the world by offering an alternative politic the oft-unnamed functional politic of Modern liberalism. The Church is known less by what it believes, though its beliefs are still important, and more by how it lives. Hauerwas is sensitive to the allure of Gnosticism, the heresy that tempts us to separate mind from body, orthodoxy from orthopraxis. This Gnostic temptation, though it predates Modernity, is one of the tools of a Modern liberalism that seeks to create spaces called "public" and "private." Hauerwas' theological ethics consistently strives to breakdown these arbitrary barriers and keep the whole person, body and soul, united in the salvation of Christ, just as the Church's mission requires it to erase false barriers like public and private.

As it is for Hauerwas' theological ethics, generally, so it is for his marital and sex ethics. He eschews natural law theology for attempting to make a universal out of that which is specific and unique to the Church. He equally eschews Modernity's appeals to realism and romanticism as the smuggling in of a foreign narrative to the life of the people of God. Instead, he trusts that

the Church is most faithful when it goes with the “grain of the universe,” that is, Jesus Christ. When the Church understands its mission as presenting Good News that necessarily entails suffering, but will result in glory, how it structures its marital life, reception of children, and sexual attitudes and orientation will be changed dramatically from any and all cultural norms. Even though Hauerwas is quick to note that the Bible says very little on marriage, sex, and the family,³⁶⁸ he does find the topic significant in its symbolic value, for through how Christians ought to order these aspects of their lives, the world can see a visible Church distinct from the world. Symbols are, of course, more significant to Hauerwas given his penchant for reading Scripture through a “symbolic world” mode of appeal. Indeed, what might be called symbolism is often a rehearsal of an eschatological reality that is made a gift to the world by the Holy Spirit.

What remains of this dissertation, then, is an attempt to supplement places where Hauerwas has either been inconsistent (same-sex marriage) or spoken very little on specific topics (cohabitation and infertility). While the present chapter has focused exclusively on Hauerwas’ works, future chapters will bring in competing voices from different theological traditions and the social sciences. As this dissertation seeks to move from Hauerwas to Hauerwasian, it will have to embody the discipline he has shown in his own writing, namely the reviewing, challenging, and correcting of other narratives of marriage, sex, and the family. It will attempt to do so with the same firm commitment to the narrative, community, and character that makes how Christians live intelligible.

³⁶⁸ Hauerwas writes, “The central documents of the Christian faith, which, oddly enough, have very little to say about sex, family, or children, do not make marriage and the family the first form of life.” (“Theological Reflection on *In Vitro* Fertilization,” *SP*, 148)

Chapter Three

Same-Sex Marriage: Arguments in Favor

INTRODUCTION TO THE DEBATE

The topic of same-sex marriage has roiled multiple Protestant traditions and denominations during the earliest years of the twenty-first century. While inclusion has routinely won the day in, amongst others, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Episcopal Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, division and schism have also followed closely behind each sea change in these traditions. Even the pursuit of the “local option”—a theme we will note, and find wanting, below—has been unable to hold together most denominations that have broaden who has access to the covenant of marriage.

While these schisms are interpersonally saddening and institutionally damaging, they should not be regarded as surprising. Even the most ardent supporter for same-sex marriage inclusion, of which I personally count myself, if they are being honest, has to acknowledge that changes to centuries-long tradition are never easy. Schism is most certainly not the faithful response, of course, but it is the easiest—and all the more so in an American context in which religious affiliation is often regarded as a voluntary participation in an affinity group. Once the Church is so understood, a radical change like same-sex marriage inclusion, for those who would seek to preserve the alternative, breaks the affinity and all-but-necessitates a change in voluntary participation.

Because this topic is so profound for the Church—history may prove that same-sex marriage inclusion is the largest change to Church teaching and tradition for this century—adequate space must be given to it, which means that the next two chapters of this work will be dedicated to the topic. In this chapter, an exclusive focus on the theologies for inclusion will be

highlighted and critically engaged. Not every theology of inclusion is as faithful or useful or as logically consistent as others, and given the magnitude of this change, only the best arguments for inclusion are worthy for the Church of Jesus Christ. Thus, the various approaches must be critically engaged in order to create space for the next chapter, in which a Hauerwasian theology for same-sex marriage inclusion can be pursued.

Not all inclusive authors write from the same vantage point on the topic, but certain recurring themes and similarities do begin to percolate, and these differences can be housed under different categories. Specifically, I will review various works as they fall into one of four categories—“Inclusion by Way of Justice,” “Inclusion by Way of Theology,” “Inclusion by Way of Mission,” and “Inclusion by Way of Scriptural Adherence.” A critical review of these categories will reveal the ways in which they are wanting and ways in which they help advance this particular conversation in a Hauerwasian manner.

A quick note about language should be made before we go any further. There are clearly two “camps” in the Church on this topic—those in favor of same-sex marriage inclusion and those who want to maintain the Church’s historic stance of opposite-sex marriage only. The language one chooses to use for these groups can be fraught with implicit judgments and biases. Lessons from the ecclesial and cultural debates around abortion should serve as caution enough about trying to be thoughtfully and faithfully objective about labels. In that debate, everyone is “pro” something, though the debate rarely feels *productive*. As such, I have chosen “Progressives” to describe the group in favor of same-sex marriage inclusion and “Traditionalists” to describe the group in favor of maintaining the Church’s historic posture of only blessing opposite-sex marriages. “Progressive” means moving forward, with the presumption of positive, faithful forward movement. It also acknowledges that such inclusion

will be a radical change and break with the Church's history, though that is not an inherently bad thing. The Church has had many seasons of significant change and reformation, and these changes are now counted as holy.³⁶⁹ This is especially true within the Protestant tradition from which and to which I write. "Traditionalist" is chosen to highlight the value of the Church's historic traditions, which have seeded today's faithfulness. It acknowledges that tradition is a good, holy, and necessary thing in an apostolic faith that is passed from one generation to the next. It takes seriously the call to be faithful stewards of this tradition for the sake of the Church's sanctification today and faithfulness to future generations. These terms are far better than the more democratically political terms of "liberal" and "conservative." Hauerwas spends too much time deconstructing Modern liberalism for us to then turn around and employ language common to it. To be sure, "Progressive" and "Traditionalist" have a political tinge, but not nearly as pronounced nor entrenched. My nuances noted, some authors below will still prefer the "liberal/conservative" binary and when they are quoted using such language, no attempt will be made to change it.

In addition to how these two camps are described and labeled, I also want to note the attempt to be sensitive in the language used for non-straight individuals. Already, above, I have employed "gay" as an umbrella term that encompasses both same-sex attracted men and women, though historically "gay" has also been used to refer exclusively to men with "lesbian" used as the corollary for women. Over time, a concern grew that such broad usages of "gay" may be akin to past usages of "mankind" to describe *all* people (i.e., "humankind"). That is to say, that "gay" as an umbrella term may be smuggling in certain sexist, male-privileging presumptions. One

³⁶⁹ The inclusion of women as clergy is a good example. My own tradition in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has only recognized the call and blessing of women as pastors for about 70 years. Though only one lifetime in length, the impact and blessing of these colleagues is now unquestioned and gratefully accepted.

alternative has been to reclaim “queer” as the umbrella term, even in spite of its past pejorative uses. An entire academic body of work has arisen—e.g., queer theory, queer theology—around this particular word. The difficulty with “queer,” however, is that it is not limited to merely sexual orientation, attraction, and intimacy, but also includes gender. In this regard, it is like the acronym LGBTQ (or LGBTQIA or LGBTQIA+). These acronyms are not an identity, per se, but an affinity group, largely created for political purposes. They acknowledge that sexual attraction rests on a spectrum that ranges from gay to straight and that gender rests on a similar spectrum of trans to cis. They understand that sexuality and gender are two different, even if inter-related, categories, but for the purposes of securing political rights in a representative democracy, unity is an important and powerful tool. As such, both “queer” and any of the variations of the above acronym are problematic for this essay for two reasons. First, there is no intent to discuss gender in this dissertation. It is an important, robust topic, but one beyond the scope of this writing.³⁷⁰ Second, smuggling in political terms only reifies Modern liberalism’s hold on theology in a manner that would undercut the long thrust of Hauerwas’ career. And so, with little recourse to any other language, “gay” as an umbrella term is used when referring to same-sex attracted individuals with both “gay” and “same-sex” used to describe the Progressive inclusion of marital rites in the Church (i.e., “gay marriage” or “same-sex marriage”). Of course, as other authors employ different language—even considerably outdated language like “homosexual” and “heterosexual”—in their writings, they will be quoted as such, with the charitable assumption that if they were to rewrite their essays or books today, they would likely employ different

³⁷⁰ Those interested in this topic may want to consult the following works:

Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Adrian Thatcher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

linguistic standards. This is especially true if these authors truly are “Progressive” in their approach, as—again—the term implies an on-going progress toward greater faithfulness and holiness.³⁷¹

Finally, I must end this introduction with an explanation as to why only those in favor of same-sex marriage inclusion are being cited. The first reason is pragmatic. To include a full review of both Progressive and Traditionalist perspectives would take too much space. Scores and scores of books and essays have been written on this particular topic during the latter decades of the twentieth and earliest decades of the twenty-first centuries. Those wishing for a review of the Traditionalist approaches can easily find those.³⁷² Also, pragmatically, the trend line among—at least—Protestant traditions is toward inclusion and so the time has come for the Church to begin to review these various, Progressive approaches for their inherent assets and faults, rather than continue to maintain them only symbiotically in relation to Traditionalists. At this point, if the Progressive argument cannot stand on its own merits, then maybe it ought not to stand at all. The second reason is closer to the thesis of the next chapter, namely that a Hauerwasian approach to theological ethics can include same-sex marriage in the Church. Because of this thesis, it is important to evaluate Hauerwas against those who claim the same. Or, maybe more accurately, to evaluate other proponents of same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church against Hauerwas’ theological ethics, as the clear preference is given to Hauerwas’

³⁷¹ I should also note, here, that I’m well-prepared to receive and engage any future linguistic changes and hope that if the language I use here proves problematic in the future that it will be granted a comparable charity by future readers. I would count such charity as grace, for we live by grace alone.

³⁷² To aid in that search, readers are encouraged to start here:

Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015)
Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001)
Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990)

approach. Given the claim of the next chapter, then, it makes sense to limit this chapter's scope only to those who are in close enough agreement so as to better refine those arguments. Finally, if the goal of both this chapter and the next is proven valid and faithful, then the Church will have a lot of repenting to do for the myriad of ways in which it has harmed gay Christians. It is important to understand the implication to any reformation in the Church, not—to be clear—as a tool by which to slow or retard such reformation, but so as to better understand the implications of the change and to spiritually prepare to receive it and all its implications. I understand that two chapters in a dissertation will not achieve the robust reconciliation necessary to heal old (and present!) wounds. The least such a chapter can do, though, is be ethically thoughtful about whose voices, perspectives, and opinions are included, for inclusion is also amplification—and certain voices are not due any further amplification. Of course, such a perspective can be simplistically labeled as “canceling” contrary voices.³⁷³ It can also be regarded as intellectual lethargy. Accordingly, readers will have to trust that no shortage of time and energy was used in reading and reviewing these authors and their works. That they are not included here, in addition to the above-stated reasons, is a reflection of the quality and character of their content.

³⁷³ “Canceling” as a cultural phenomenon originated in black—and, especially, in queer black—communities, especially as they formed on the social media platform of Twitter. It originated as a form of in-group speech, used primarily as a tool for amusement, therapy, and warning. That is, for example, a member of this community might encounter a particular Twitter post or news item and share it as “#cancel.” In doing so, they signal to others their perspective that this item is dangerous, defaming, and/or derogatory. They also embody a sort of play-acting of the source's irrelevance, even as their acknowledgement of its dangerous content betrays its very real relevance. As such, in an irony of all ironies, if those whose voices are not included in this dissertation because they run against the inclusion of gay Christians want to protest by claiming they have been canceled, they do so only because gay/queer individuals created the very category of “cancelled.” If gay folks can be a blessing in this small way, maybe they can also bless the Church with their nuptials in other ways. And, if so, this undercuts the Traditionalist argument against their full inclusion in the life of the Church.

INCLUSION BY WAY OF JUSTICE

To begin, it must be noted that appeals to “justice” are often only haphazardly also appeals to scripture. This is not to say that scripture does not contain an ethic of justice, but rather that those who pursue justice as their primary methodological approach tend to reach for a broad array of sources beyond scripture, or in addition to scripture. From a Hauerwasian perspective, this already creates potential trouble as the authority of narrative (and the interpretive community that both forms it and is formed by it) is decentered in favor of abstract principles, which are themselves potentially products of a non-biblical narrative (e.g., Modern liberalism).

The theme of applying principles to help substantiate a more progressive theology of sex finds a clear and systematic presentation in Marvin M. Ellison’s *Erotic Justice*³⁷⁴. In this work, Ellison sets out to “reclaim... an erotic sense of justice [as] an often-overlooked avenue for mobilizing people’s energies for both personal and social transformation.”³⁷⁵ As Ellison makes clear, he hopes this book will attract allies to a broad justice agenda. What isn’t as clear is how important the Christian Church or Christian theology is to these tasks. Much of the earliest parts of the book are dedicated to deconstructing both ecclesiastic and cultural views of sex, which present a “dis-ease with sex and power.”³⁷⁶

While Ellison’s book may not be clear in how it works out of the Christian tradition—even though Ellison is a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor and seminary professor—Ellison does clearly and helpfully present his understanding of justice, sexuality, and oppression. Justice

³⁷⁴ Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

is “the ongoing, never-ending journey to remake community by strengthening relationship”³⁷⁷ and is a “communally secured respect and regard for persons.”³⁷⁸ Sexuality “includes genital sex but refers more broadly to our embodied capacity for intimate connection.”³⁷⁹ Finally, oppression “violate[s] the earth and/or people’s bodies, offend[s] the human spirit, and block[s] authentic community.”³⁸⁰ Using these concepts, Ellison presents—very early on in his work—a thesis of what “a justice-centered sexual ethic”³⁸¹ that is theological should look like. It has several characteristics: “Power is fairly distributed and used to build community, goods and resources are equitably produced and shared, and people thrive because they are deeply valued, cared for, and respected in all their diversity.”³⁸²

The justification of this work presents itself in the myriad of ways that the Christian church, secular society, and even liberalism have failed to produce sexual justice. To begin, Ellison paints the Christian church as “tenaciously grabb[ing] hold of the family and sexuality as their last domain of authority,”³⁸³ as the church’s overall cultural influence has waned. In many regards, Ellison *is* writing this work for Christians so that the church can overcome its presumed irrelevance and reclaim its spot as culturally influential. Secular society, which Ellison acknowledges appears more at ease with sexual diversity, is critiqued for the ways in which “sex is widely commodified as a means to drive consumption.”³⁸⁴ Finally, even liberalism—the tradition to which Ellison acknowledges his indebtedness—is chastised for the ways that it “splits public from private life”³⁸⁵ and “leaves in place the patriarchal split between thinking and

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 3.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

³⁸² Ibid., 2.

³⁸³ Ibid., 5.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 7.

feeling, a gender-based dichotomy in which feeling, associated with women and things female, is devalued, while rationality and abstract reasoning, associated with men and things male, is prized.”³⁸⁶ Ellison further deconstructs liberalism for the ways in which “its tendency toward individualism places self-regard and other-regard in tension, forever in opposition,”³⁸⁷ as well as the ways it “accepts the prevailing cultural model of power as unilateral control.”³⁸⁸ As a result, Ellison declares himself and his project as “postliberal.” It is worth noting here, however, that Ellison does not use “postliberal” in the same sense that Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, or Hauerwas might use that term. As best can be deduced, Ellison’s work might be better categorized as “postmodern”—or maybe “neo-liberal”—rather than “postliberal.” This distinction will reveal itself as significant later in this work when the theological ethics of Hauerwas—and others sympathetic to his theological method—are put into comparison with Ellison. For now, it is sufficient enough that the reader understands that this word, “postliberal,” has multiple meanings.

In response to liberalism’s failures, Ellison wants his readers to understand “erotic power as a significant *moral* power.”³⁸⁹ Part of the strategy of “erotic justice” is “listening to—and giving priority to—those who are subjected to sexual oppression,”³⁹⁰ which will aid in the need “to restructure power dynamics and renew cultural traditions,”³⁹¹ primarily by a “move-to-the-margins”³⁹² that decenters the “encoded *elite affluent, white male* perspectives and their moral interests about sexuality.”³⁹³ And while much of these problems are present in church and

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 8.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 10.

³⁹² Ibid., 11.

³⁹³ Ibid., 10—emphasis original.

society alike, Ellison explicitly notes the ways these problems have particularly harmed theological insight. As he writes, “Because theological liberalism has refused to be ‘baptized’ by feminism and gay/lesbian/bisexual liberation, it has also failed to incorporate the moral wisdom of these justice movements into its own moral paradigms.”³⁹⁴ This “moral wisdom” is the “erotic justice” that decenters patriarchy by listening to the voices from the margins. Erotic justice, therefore, proposes “a shift in Christian ethical thinking from a love-centered liberal ethic, which privatizes sexuality as a concern individuals must manage on their own, to a justice-centered liberating ethic that connects people’s personal pains (and joys) with larger socio-cultural dynamics that either frustrate or enhance communal well-being.”³⁹⁵

Ellison situates his erotic justice within (or, maybe, against) the current cultural framework regarding sex, which is, itself, a dynamic interplay between “sexual traditionalists,” “sexual libertarians,” and “sexual liberalism.”³⁹⁶ Sexual traditionalists are understood by their concern for “the abandonment of traditional values”³⁹⁷ and they argue for a return to “conventional controls needed to channel human sexuality in safe, familiar directions.”³⁹⁸ By starkest contrast, sexual liberationists “argue for unrestricted sexual freedom and the erasing of institutional regulations about sex.”³⁹⁹ While Ellison regards their contributions as largely positive, he objects to the ways “they promote a sexuality magically freed from social

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 12.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

³⁹⁶ It is interesting to wonder if Ellison would have created four categories here, rather than three, if his work had considered Andrew Sullivan’s *Virtually Normal* (1995). In *Virtually Normal*, Sullivan categorizes four views of sexuality as “Prohibitionists,” “Liberationists,” “Conservatives,” and “Liberals.” While Ellison is only giving his descriptions a few pages, Sullivan dedicates four chapters—the majority of his book—to this complex task of categorization. Thus, any discrepancies can be chalked up to the works’ differing theses, but it still remains true that Sullivan may do more—and better—work off of which Ellison could build. See: Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage Publishing, 1996).

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 20.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 20.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 20.

consequences and, therefore, exempt from moral evaluation.”⁴⁰⁰ The majority of Ellison’s summarization and deconstruction, however, is reserved for sexual liberalism, who “praise the goodness of sexuality but hedge their bets about whether eroticism is morally good.”⁴⁰¹ Sexual liberals “fear that sexual freedom, unless carefully contained, will inexorably lead to excess and moral turpitude.”⁴⁰² By contrast, Ellison’s erotic justice seeks to unleash the erotic as a benevolent power in making and demonstrating justice. Erotic justice is not libertarian precisely for the reason that it is still concerned with “other-care,” but is not liberal precisely for the reason that it does not want to contain erotic pleasure out of concern that controlling the erotic is really and ultimately a means of controlling justice.

With these three major branches of influence each defined and revealed of their shortcomings, Ellison once again points the reader back to the margins, claiming “no sexual ethic will be helpful or credible until those most affected by sexual injustice directly shape the moral discourse.”⁴⁰³ It is here, however, that Ellison may reveal that he’s overplayed his hand. By painting the discourse on sex in such broad, far-reaching ways in which no group—even those with hegemonic control—are unaffected, Ellison must do better at explaining what he means by “those most affected.” It is in this moment that Ellison may be revealed as being not as postliberal (or postmodern or neo-liberal) as he might contend. The deepest postmodern insights—like those proffered by Michel Foucault—reveal that the constructions from our discourse on sex soon grow larger than those who created it and, in the end, consume them alongside those the discourse initially set out to oppress. This tension may be no better seen than in this sentence by Ellison: “Resisting injustice gives an epistemological advantage to those on

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 23.

the underside.” Such a statement makes good, rational sense in the paradigm Ellison has presented because it reveals why voices from the margin must be heard. However, the use of the phrase “those on the underside” has the implicit (and, certainly, unintentional) effect of reifying the very power dynamics it seeks to overturn. One is only on “the underside” because of the system of power relations that has placed one there. To privilege such a voice is to also, simultaneously, freeze that voice in its socially constructed place of oppression. Or, alternatively, to center those voices in a manner that will tempt them to become the very oppressors they have heretofore reviled, as well as move them away from the “margins,” presumably the very place of their moral authority. What Ellison has stumbled upon is the difficulty between “essentialist” and “non-essentialist” ways of thinking.

It is worth pausing here to consider why Ellison appears to double back on his own way of thinking. It is too simple to merely state that Ellison’s approach is inadequate because it reveals itself to be internally duplicitous. While maybe scoring a rhetorical point, such analysis is wanting. Instead, it is worth turning to the very queer theology Ellison is, at times, employing to help illuminate the troubles. In his essay, “Beyond Theology and Sexuality: Foucault, the Self and the Que(e)rying of Monotheistic Truth,”⁴⁰⁴ Jeremy Carrette writes,

The function of queer theory as an intellectual task following poststructuralism is, in part at least, a strategy to break essentialist categories and constructs. The queerness of queer theory is that it challenges us, not only to leave the discourses of the closet and ‘coming out’ (both essentialist constructs), but also to redraw the entire epistemological map or Western thinking about not only sexuality and the politics of identity but the very space of religion.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Jeremy Carrette, “Beyond Theology and Sexuality: Foucault, the Self and the Que(e)rying of Monotheistic Truth,” in *Michel Foucault and Theology*, eds. James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

⁴⁰⁵ Carrette, 220.

Carrette also notes, “Foucault’s genealogical method was used to identify the ‘deployment of sexuality’; it revealed sexuality as an ‘historical system of discourse and power’. Sexuality was seen as an historical construction and the inadequacy of the essentialist terminology of homo- and heterosexual is revealed.”⁴⁰⁶ It is in this revelation of homosexual and heterosexual as essentialist terms that are, in fact, actually social constructions that Ellison’s challenges begin. For Ellison is employing a version of a liberating, queer theology, but within this theology is a raging, on-going debate about essentialism and non-essentialism. The problem is not so much that there are those who regard the essentialist terms as inherently valuable, but rather that such terms are *politically* valuable.

Later in his essay, Carrette will note that he is describing an issue that other thinkers—like Judith Butler—have long noted. There is general agreement that the insights provided by Foucault regarding the non-essential nature of sexual identity are good and true. There is, however, an equal acknowledgement that current legal structures employ an essentialist framework. Therefore, any attempts to gain legal rights and privileges will necessarily involve an acquiescence to essentialist thinking. In fact, Butler acknowledges as much in the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of her work, *Gender Trouble*⁴⁰⁷: “Even as I think that gaining recognition for one’s status as a sexual minority is a difficult task within reigning discourses of law, politics, and language, I continue to consider it a necessity for survival. The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes.”⁴⁰⁸ Butler is echoed by queer theologian Patrick S. Cheng, who writes, “Although in some ways it may be helpful for a

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 220.

⁴⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁴⁰⁸ Butler, xxvi.

minority group (such as ‘homosexuals’) to identify itself in essentialist terms for purposes of achieving greater political or legal power, ultimately such classifications are problematic because, as Foucault pointed out, such classifications are actually a means by which society circumscribes and exercises power and control over the classified group.”⁴⁰⁹

In the end, Carrette acutely diagnosis Ellison’s troubles when he writes, “Theology now responds to this positivity of self with studies that affirm sexuality as a part of spiritual. These studies, valuable as they are in overcoming sexual guilt and ignorance in Christianity, uncritically support and sustain the oppressive discourse of sexuality.”⁴¹⁰ Thus we find that Ellison—while attempting the correction of ignorance and the overturning of injustice—has (quite inadvertently it must be assumed) underwritten the very presuppositions his work seeks to overturn. To his credit, Carrette is willing to go all-in on the deconstruction of every essentialism, including theological essentials. As he writes, “If Christianity can move beyond its ideology of monotheism, it may just be possible to move beyond sexuality and homophobia. The challenge to the Christian church is to give up its control of the body by giving up its control of God.”⁴¹¹ This is a more-than-adequate articulation of at least one aspect of queer theology. As Cheng explains, “queer theology is ‘talk about God’ that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity.”⁴¹² Neither Carrette nor Cheng give adequate reason for why Christianity must move beyond monotheism (certainly a Truth deserving of the label “essential”) and it is not clear that Ellison would be prepared to do so. Yet, at least to the degree that Carrette has correctly charted the path, the only means by which Ellison may escape

⁴⁰⁹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 7.

⁴¹⁰ Carrette, 224.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴¹² Cheng, 9.

his reification tendencies is precisely the rejection of all essentials—including, presumably, the essential of the “erotic” as he has so defined it.

This momentary aside to address Ellison’s reification troubles is useful in helping to understand his text better. Ellison is an essentialist and is, therefore, probably better described as not overturning all essentials, but rather broadening the categories of accepted and acceptable essential identities. In short, Ellison’s work is a political work; it is a form of apologetics. As a form of apologetics, it must employ principles that are already accepted by the status quo and demonstrate how his positions fit within or employ these principles. It may very well be the case that Ellison has abstract, theoretical sympathies with non-essentialism, but when it matters most—that is, when his ethic must be employed in an actual, concrete culture—his ethic seeks to accommodate this culture by accepting its essentialism presuppositions.

Ellison is aware of the differing views of essentialism and non-essentialism (or, as he calls it, “constructionism”⁴¹³). And though he is highly critical of essentialism, he clearly demonstrates his allegiance to its political efficacy when he writes, “The normative, a product of moral discernment and deliberation, reflects a communal valuing of what is good, right, and fitting. Normative judgments, including those made about sexuality, are subject to challenge and revision. What *is* may be far off from what *ought* to be.”⁴¹⁴ As such, his appeal to the constructed nature of sexuality and sexual relations—an appeal that spans the history of the United States in his work—is presented only as motivation for the sort of changes that could be possible if, indeed, erotic justice is permitted to flourish rather than racist, sexist, and heterosexist norms

⁴¹³ Ellison, 33.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33—emphasis original.

currently in place. As he notes, “the intent of liberating ethics is to transform the tradition itself.”⁴¹⁵

Central to his strategy for employing erotic justice is—as he titles chapter four—“reimagining good sex: the eroticizing of mutual respect and pleasure.” To do this, he first notes that “many people find themselves erotically aroused only by dominant/subordinate power relations.”⁴¹⁶ Worse yet, these power relations do not merely exist beyond the boundaries of the body but are “somatized” into the body. This occurs when “the powerful presume they are entitled to control others. They feel their entitlement deep in their bones.”⁴¹⁷ But such somatizing is not the exclusive purview of the powerful, for “the less powerful feel obligated to be securely placed under someone else’s control. They feel fear and guilt if they venture to cross the line.”⁴¹⁸ Therefore, when this process of somatization occurs, “inequalities of power and status are naturalized as something that feels right to people, close to their skins.”⁴¹⁹ It is worth noting, again, how Ellison employs constructionism (or non-essentialism) in his descriptions, while presenting an overarching argument that is essentialist in quality. Furthermore, before we turn to what it means to eroticize mutual respect, we must also note an unintentional consequence in accepting Ellison’s arguments for somatization.

Much of progressive Christian thinking about sex ethics rests securely in the authority of experience. Indeed, Ellison even points his readers to this source of authority by insisting upon listening to the voices from the margins. However, if what Ellison claims is true—namely that “people internalize in their bodies, not simply in their psyches, the belief that injustice feels good

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 76.

and safe”⁴²⁰—is indeed true, then it raises a question about the validity of what these voices from the margins testify to. How, or why, should voices that have somatized messages of injustice be privileged? How can the hearer differentiate between a positive, resistant message and a message that is merely the parroting, perpetuation, and reification of somatized injustice?

Ellison attempts an answer to this question (which is, admittedly, posed from beyond the book and not within it) when he writes, “Living passionately in our bodies, living from the center outward (rather than from external scripts), opens us to vital and at times playful interaction with others.”⁴²¹ Rather than attempt to assess the validity of this statement, it is better to note that Ellison presumes that within each person is two selves. The first, and clearly preferred, is who a person is at his/her “center.” Ellison doesn’t open any unnecessary can of worms by labeling this center the “heart” or “soul” or anything else like that, but he does imply a center that is essential to who the person is. The second, and clearly to be rejected, is who a person is based upon “external scripts.” This is the person who has not only participated in dominant/subordinate power relations but has even allowed such relations to be somatized into one’s self. Yet even still, it remains unclear if the process of somatization can work itself into one’s “center” to such a degree that a person’s whole self becomes but a replication of the external script. And while one may not know the answer to the question, what is known is that Ellison is clearly seeking to overcome the essentialist/constructionist binary with a “both/and” approach. We are essentially something at our center, but we are also—in very real, bodily ways—the social constructions of our culture. And, ethically, what is to be preferred is the essential over the construction.

In an ironic twist, Ellison might actually prove to be rather traditional in his anthropology. Even traditionalists would acknowledge some form of social constructionism—

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 79.

typically they would call it sin or temptation—exists as a threat to an essential self, such as the self as God’s good creation. Unlike the previous tension when Ellison first presented essentialist tendencies while working within queer theology’s constructionism—a problem whose resolution can be explained both by the political necessity of accommodating the essentialism that undergird laws and rules, as well as Ellison’s own unique dialogic between essentialism and constructionism—it is not as evident how Ellison’s presumption of a pure, unadulterated “center” is to be differentiated from traditionalists who might claim much of the same. Furthermore, Ellison’s Reformed Presbyterian heritage and its Calvinist emphasis on the total depravity of the self—that is the self that is born in sin and always rebellious against its Creator and God, except by the grace of Jesus Christ—would also provide a major challenge to the “center” that Ellison posits above.

Regardless of these fissures in his thinking, it is important to see Ellison’s ethic to its end, especially in terms of his program of eroticizing mutual respect and pleasure. Central to this eroticizing is the requirement of immense respect for bodies. In avoiding any Cartesian dualism, Ellison often uses the neologism “body-selves.” And the ethical eroticism of our body-selves “operates with four central value commitments: to honor the goodness of the body, of bodily integrity or self-direction, of mutuality, and of fidelity.”⁴²² As Ellison continues, “To begin with, bodies are good, capable of giving and receiving pleasure.”⁴²³ As such, erotic justice will always honor the goodness of bodies. Next, self-direction is a moral good in which “each person is entitled to choose whether (and how) to relate with his or her body. Body right means freedom from control and manipulation by another.”⁴²⁴ Third, mutuality means that “sex is not doing

⁴²² Ibid., 81.

⁴²³ Ibid., 82.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 82.

something *to* someone else but is rather a mutual process of *being with* and *feeling with* another person. Persons, not mere body parts, meet and touch.”⁴²⁵ Finally, “fidelity means honoring our commitments, working together to maintain trust, and renegotiating with one’s partner as needs, desires, and conditions unfold. Fidelity is dependent on mutual openness and honesty. It is violated by dishonesty, but also by an unwillingness to grow and change as the relationship develops.”⁴²⁶ Of these four, fidelity is the most difficult to justify given Ellison’s other commitments, for fidelity is only intelligible within a particular narrative—an “external script” to use his language—and it is unclear that he is comfortable incorporating any script into his erotic justice. Or, alternatively, he has failed to demonstrate how fidelity is made intelligible by our “center.”

This process of eroticizing mutual respect will mean that much of the current, prevailing sexual ideology must be left behind. The first example of the prevailing sexual ideology is marriage—especially compulsory coupling marriage. While Ellison does acknowledge that “egalitarian, justice-bearing marriages offer a framework of accountability and a relatively stable, secure place in which to form durable bonds of mutual trust and devotion,”⁴²⁷ it also runs the risk of leaving those who are not married, for whatever the reasons, unable to access the power of the erotic so necessary for pursuing justice. It “also encourages dependency patterns between intimates,”⁴²⁸ especially as it “restricts the range and significance of other friendships”⁴²⁹ and “weakens the ties with the larger human community.”⁴³⁰ Of course, Hauerwas would note that no marriage is safe when cut off from the friendships found in the

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 82—emphasis original.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 82-83.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 84.

Church, so there is some mutual agreement between the two on the importance of friendship, though Ellison does not go far enough in presenting marriage as not only capable, but required, to create and sustain such friendships. He merely asserts that they are apt to jettison friendship.

It is clear throughout Ellison's presentation of "good sex" that it is insufficient to "have focused more on the *form* than on the *substance* of sexual relations."⁴³¹ Once substance is put at the center, the values of mutual respect, care, and affection are emphasized. What is not as clear, however, is where these values come from. Throughout this work, Ellison has rarely mentioned scripture or even broad-based Christian principles. No explanation is given for why mutual respect, care, and affection are chief virtues in an erotic justice, which tempts the reader to understand these virtues as just inherently good. If this is, indeed, what Ellison has done—and, again, it is difficult to understand how he has done anything other than set the reader up to just presume their inherent goodness—then he has made a covert appeal to that which is self-evident and reasonable. Such an appeal, once again, drips of traditionalist reasoning as Ellison appears to trade out one set of natural law attributes (e.g., physiological complementarity) for another set of attributes (e.g., mutual respect). Such a view also presumes the lone, individual moral agent that acts and performs mutual respect (or care or affection) out of one's inherent agency as an individual. Such an individual is clearly a product of Modern liberalism thinking and looks much more like Immanuel Kant's creation, than God's. It also, furthermore, rejects the power of culture in forming or constructing individuals. Ellison's ideal moral agent is a far cry from the oppressed, somatized individual of the previous chapter.

That Ellison has in mind an Enlightenment ideal of who an individual is also trickles down into his ecclesiology—or what there is of it. Once the individual has been established in

⁴³¹ Ibid., 85—emphasis original.

the center of the moral universe, the church is decentered—or, maybe more appropriately, *recentered* on the individual. As Ellison writes, “Religious communities should not be policing people’s sex lives, but rather educating them about the real world of sexual diversity and expanding their moral imaginations.”⁴³² These communities should also “educate us to trust, deep within our bodies, that we connect with others only to the extent that we stay genuinely present to, and affirming of, ourselves.”⁴³³ Thus, we find, that even connections to others begins first in a relationship with the self. These are some of the most Modernist lines in Ellison’s purportedly postmodern ethic. He also presumes Hauerwas’ reviled “realist” approach to sexuality insofar as he asserts “the real world of sexual diversity.”

I began this review of Marvin Ellison’s *Erotic Justice*, by noting that it extends a common theme found in most progressive sex ethics of focusing on principles. The review of this book clearly demonstrates a commitment to principles such as mutual respect and care, as well as a form of primary self-love. However, *Erotic Justice* also reveals the danger in basing an ethic off of a principle, namely that all principles are based upon even more foundational presuppositions and that in accepting a principle, one inherently accepts the underlying presuppositions. Often times, then, a moral principle may appear progressive on the surface but be found to share traditional presuppositions. Such was the case in Ellison’s conflicted use of essentialism in his ethic. Such essentialism—even when he tries to carve out caveats such as ‘not form but substance’—opens wide the conversation to more conservative or traditional essentials.

Yet the greatest problem in basing a Christian ethic off of principles is that it quickly loses any unique Christian identity or character. Typically, these principles—love, justice, mutual respect—have to be divorced from the Christian narratives that would make them

⁴³² Ibid., 88.

⁴³³ Ibid., 89-90.

intelligible in order to be applied broadly as an ethic. This is most evident in the dearth of references to God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, or Christian disciplines throughout the entirety of Ellison's book. Only Song of Songs is given more than a passing reference in *Erotic Love* and, even then, the analysis extends for only a couple of pages. Indeed, one wonders if Ellison needed Jesus at all to write this book. Jesus appears to play no significant part in this liberating sex ethic.

Yet the problems of principles do not end there. We will also find—in other texts—that this appeal to principles doesn't just work one way. It is not only the case that the Bible is read, a principle deduced, and then applied to a topic. It also works that principles are understood, applied to the Bible, and then new and imaginative readings of scripture abound.

Some of Ellison's troubles are resolved by Margaret Farley. There may not be enough superlatives to accurately describe the breadth, depth, and integrity in Farley's *Just Love*.⁴³⁴ Farley winds her way through both history and differing cultures, laying groundwork for her turn to constructing, as the book is subtitled, "a framework for Christian sexual ethics." This framework is presented in chapters five and six, where Farley sets out "to develop a justice ethic of sexual activities and relationships based simply on a general understanding of justice."⁴³⁵ This is not to say, however, that her ethic is not distinctly Christian, but rather it is founded upon a general, Christian understanding of justice. This focus takes her through the typical sources for ethical reflection—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Farley's contribution to the sources, though, comes through in her articulation of the high place experience holds—a position that is reversed amongst Traditionalists who privilege the authority of scripture over and even against experience. A rise in the stature of experience is a hallmark of most Progressive approaches to marital and sex ethics.

⁴³⁴ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008)

⁴³⁵ Farley, 178.

Given her emphasis on “just love,” it is appropriate to state how Farley defines each of those words. Just (or justice), Farley writes, “is based simply on the classical fundamental ‘formal’ meaning: to render to each her or his due.”⁴³⁶ Love is “placing one’s *affective self-affirmation in affective affirmation of the beloved*. It involves, in other words, placing my love of myself in loving affirmation of the one that I love.”⁴³⁷ “Just love,” then, must involve giving each his or her due, as he or she understands what is due to them. Such a position involves a thick description of personhood, focusing especially on each individual’s autonomy and relationality. As a result, seven norms are elucidated:

- Do No Unjust Harm: “In the sexual sphere, ‘do no unjust harm’ takes on particular significance... because sexuality is so intimate to persons, vulnerability exists in our embodiment and in the depths of our spirits.”⁴³⁸
- Free Consent: Persons have the right “to determine their own actions and their relationships in the sexual sphere of their lives.”⁴³⁹
- Mutuality: Mutuality of participation means “the key for us has become not activity/passivity but active receptivity and receptive activity—each partner active, each one receptive.”⁴⁴⁰
- Equality in terms of power: “If the power differential is too great, dependency will limit freedom, and mutuality will go awry.”⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 208.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 201—emphasis original.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 218-219.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 223.

- Commitment: “Some form of commitment, some form of covenant or at least contract, must characterize relations that include a sexual dimension.”⁴⁴² Commitment is not an end, but a means because sexuality is powerful enough that it “needs to be nurtured, sustained, as well as disciplined, channeled, controlled.”⁴⁴³
- Fruitfulness: Not only, or every primarily, of the procreative variety, Farley notes that the relationality of personhood requires that love and sex not “close in upon itself and refuse to open to a wider community of persons.”⁴⁴⁴
- Social Justice: Every sex act must “point to the kind of justice that everyone in a community or society is obligated to affirm for its members as sexual beings.”⁴⁴⁵

Farley’s final point about just love is that it is not about rules over bodies, relationships, and behaviors, but about an ethic that explains who we are to be, if we are to be just, or as she writes, “A human justice ethic, and surely a Christian justice ethic, must attend not only to action guides but the kinds of persons we are called to be.”⁴⁴⁶

The turn to character is novel in much Progressive writing, but it extends logically and thoughtfully from Farley’s insistence on the roll social justice must play in individuals’ sex lives. She has not set out to write for individuals, but for the society in which individuals live. The unstated assumption is that societies are not formed nor known by their rules, but rather by their character. Yet, while Farley does introduce character, she does not spend enough time developing this theme, especially when compared to the rest of her work.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 224.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 241.

In many regards, Farley ends any debate on same-sex marriage before it can even begin, which is to say that she begins with an assertion that there can be no outright rejection of such relationships and that their character as relationships will be relative to their exercising appropriate just love within them. Having begun from such a strong position—she writes, “the key question here is not whether same-sex relationships can be ethically justified, but what must characterize these relationships when they are justified”⁴⁴⁷—her approach turns more apologetic, seeking to demonstrate the inconsistency of scripture, tradition, and both the hard and social sciences, which creates epistemological room for experience. Regarding scripture, Farley writes that the Hebrew Scriptures are preoccupied with sex only (or primarily) as it pertains to “the obligation to marry and procreate,”⁴⁴⁸ “the patriarchal model upon which ideas of marriage and society were institutionally based,”⁴⁴⁹ and “distinguishing practices of the Israelites from what was considered the idolatry of neighboring nations.”⁴⁵⁰ While the Christian Scriptures “offers no systematic code of sexual ethics.”⁴⁵¹ Her approach to tradition short-circuits Traditionalist arguments when she writes, “As far as I know, no one today is trying to argue that homosexual relationships or actions should be condemned simply because the Christian tradition has always thought about homosexuality is a certain way.”⁴⁵² While she is likely right that no one argues to the effect of “we have to condemn same-sex marriages because we’ve always condemned same-sex marriages,” nearly every Traditionalist will cite the Church’s historic stance against same-sex sexual activity as a complementing argument to their—typically biblical—position. Farley rightly notes that tradition, like scripture, needs to be hermeneutically employed with some

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 274.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 277.

standards and ethics, though it is disappointing to note that she fails to find anything meaningful in the church’s traditions, Catholic or Protestant, that could help substantiate same-sex marriage. To be sure, such a tradition or practice, whatever it may be, would have to be carefully excavated from its historical roots to find fresh expression in the contemporary church, but Farley fails to pursue this avenue, offering instead a summary of how “the twentieth century has seen dramatic developments in both Roman Catholic and Protestant sexual ethics.”⁴⁵³

Her review of secular sources in the sciences only yields “modest” insights:

- “The empirical sciences have not determined that homosexuality is of itself, in a culture-free way, harmful to human persons.”⁴⁵⁴
- “Some rationales for religious and philosophical negative judgments of same-sex relationships—as well as popular beliefs that derive from these—have been shown to be false by empirical research.”⁴⁵⁵
- “Same-sex orientation may be natural for some persons if by ‘natural’ is meant a given characteristic, impossible to change without doing violence to the nature of a person as a whole.”⁴⁵⁶
- “Same-sex preference in sexual relations may be an option for many persons since human persons have generally a greater or lesser capacity to respond emotionally and sexually to persons of both the opposite or same sex.”⁴⁵⁷

Finally, Farley turns to experience which takes on added import because “given the arguable inconclusiveness of Scripture, tradition, and secular disciplines, concrete experience becomes a

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 278.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 285.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 285.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 285-286.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 286.

determining source on this issue.”⁴⁵⁸ As a result, “the witness of experience is enough to demand of the Christian community that it reflect anew on the norms for homosexual love.”⁴⁵⁹

For Farley, the real goal is to present an ethic for same-sex relationships more than a justification of these relationships. In doing so, she merely reiterates the seven norms noted above, but now applied to gay men and lesbian women. While the equality shown to the gay community—that is, presenting ethics for them that are the same as for straight people—may appear egalitarian and correct, it also neglects the unique insights, theologically and otherwise, that gay Christians and individuals can bring to a conversation on ethics. Though Farley writes from a Progressive position, her greatest critics may come from Queer theorists and theologians—e.g., Carrette’s essay that was reviewed in the section about Ellison above—that are even more progressive than her. The challenge for Farley is found in her comfort with essentialist arguments.

Contrary to Ellison’s work, Farley appears more comfortable with an essentialist framework. She might come under critique by a rigorous postmodern reading, but the pragmatic edge to her work makes it appear that such postmodern deconstruction is not much of a concern for her. What is potentially problematic for Farley’s work is the presumption that there can be a universal ethic of justice that does not inherently do harm to some person or group—and that the Christian tradition is suitable for the construction of just such a universal ethic. This approach is, ironically, rather conservative or Traditionalist in its appeal. Because Traditionalists root their ethics and interpretation of scripture primarily in the creation narratives found in Genesis, they often claim that what is ultimately presented in the Bible as normative is, indeed, normative for all people, in all places, and at all times. While the content of Farley’s work is likely to differ

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 287.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 288.

radically from Traditionalists, her aim is very much in line with their own. Yet what does not necessarily hold is the assumption that any such ethic, even rooted in a concept like justice with its presumption of serving the *common* good, can be achieved through a Christian tradition that has been constructed around guidance for growing the holiness of a select and even elect people (in the Old Testament) and for enacting sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit given in adoption into the family of God via baptism (in the New Testament). Such theological realities raise considerable questions about “inclusion” by dint of being founded in exclusive realities. Most simply put, one cannot merely excise the unique offerings of the Christian tradition, leave behind general principles, and still call the resulting ethic “Christian.” It is quite possible that any good works—whether they are chastity outside of marriage or mutuality—are impossible apart from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. At the very least, such good works are only going to find their intelligibility in God’s redemptive-sanctifying work.

This critique, of course, is not only directed at Farley and her otherwise insightful contributions to this conversation but remains a challenge for anyone who wishes to seek a more inclusive church by way of concepts of justice that rely too heavily upon principles sheered from their theological source. Inclusion may still very well be the holy option before the church but appeals to “justice” are likely to leave the faithful wanting in their approach and will likely leave same-sex individuals unserved and excluded as their outcome. It remains to be seen if other approaches to inclusion can find the way forward for the sake and sanctity of the church.

INCLUSION BY WAY OF THEOLOGY

Just as “justice” is a narrative that may or may not correspond to scripture but is still a narrative accounting of a people’s common life together, so theology is a narrative that, itself,

may or may not correspond to scripture, but is still a narrative accounting of God’s action in God’s creation. When it comes to telling the theological story of marriage, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. makes one of the most compelling cases—and without sacrificing any biblical integrity.

Rogers sets out in his *Sexuality and the Christian Body*⁴⁶⁰ to offer “a defense of marriage wide enough to include same-sex couples and committed celibates.”⁴⁶¹ He does so by drawing together the relationship between the human body and the Trinitarian God, the incarnate Word of God, the body of the Church, and the body of Christ present in the Eucharist. It seeks to explain “how marriage might be recovered from individualism for the community, how it might be revitalized as a locus of sanctification.”⁴⁶² Clearly beleaguered by the church’s debates around human sexuality, Rogers describes how “popular theology falls into liberal apologetics, conservative defense, and anthologies of essays on one or both sides.”⁴⁶³ Rogers does well to avoid the pitfalls of the justice approach above when, as he writes, “Although extra-Christian debates about identity and constructivism versus essentialism lie in the background, I consider them only as they appear *within* Christian discourse. I seek to discern a hermeneutic of the body *other* than Foucault’s.”⁴⁶⁴ Additionally, Rogers displays the narrative nature of theology, when he writes how this work “is more an attempt to retell and renarrate bits of the Christian story so as to reveal the coherence of Christian thought with a practice of marriage broad enough to include gay and lesbian couples, and leaving room for vowed celibates in community, all under the same analysis.”⁴⁶⁵ Finally, Rogers finds a common theme in Hauerwasian methodology—and sympathy with this dissertation—when he writes, “One purpose of this book is to create a

⁴⁶⁰ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1999).

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9—emphasis original.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

convergence on Christian sexuality among traditionalists and revisionists in the sense of ‘relocating their opposition as no longer at the center of things.’ The center of things, for Christians, is God’s marriage with humanity in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶⁶

While Rogers wants to approach this topic from a strictly theological perspective, he is not dense to the social, cultural, and political arguments that rage around it and, especially, how these non-theological traditions often smuggle their way into theological debates. Accordingly, he begins by clearing some epistemological space by reviewing the differences between both the politics of the people of God versus cultural politics, as well as the different ways in which Traditionalists and Progressives mishear and misrepresent one another within the church. He acknowledges the wide berth of difference between church and society when he writes that “theology has used one set of terms—creation, election, incarnation, resurrection—while ethically charged postmodern discourse uses another—embodiment, race, gender, orientation.”⁴⁶⁷ Such differences of language betray a deeper difference of narrative presuppositions between church and society. By speaking past each other, church and culture fail to actually dialogue on topics of such great importance. Yet Rogers’ goal is not to merely syncretize theology into cultural terms as a form of apologetics, but rather to explain what “marriage and the eucharist (as well as baptism and monastic vows) tell Christians what bodies are for before God, or what they mean, by incorporating them into the body of Christ.”⁴⁶⁸ In doing so, he hopes to “connect doctrines like incarnation, election, and resurrection with race, gender, and orientation,”⁴⁶⁹ thereby shrinking the divide between church and society.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

He then turns his attention to inner-church debates, in which “many thoughtful Christians and students of Christianity experience frustration”⁴⁷⁰ because “both traditional and liberal religious arguments about the body sound too easy to their opponents.”⁴⁷¹ The result is an entire corpus of literature in which “liberals can make conservatives look dumb, and conservatives can make liberals look shallow.”⁴⁷² Rogers’ value to this conversation is in providing a typology of both Progressives (what he calls liberals) and Traditionalists (what he calls conservatives). As he writes about the Progressives first, “Fairly or unfairly, liberals type the conservative arguments in five ways: as narratives misread, literalism misplaced, natural law immune from natural science, vocation misapplied to groups, and tradition at odds with justice.”⁴⁷³ He then flips his focus to the Traditionalists’ views, writing, “Fairly or unfairly, conservatives can type liberal arguments in five ways, too: as narratives misread, difficult passages ignored, natural science substituted for theology, heretical regard for souls over bodies, and experience substituted for tradition.”⁴⁷⁴ While thorough, even for a simple typology, Rogers ultimately reduces the two sides to two, important foci: identity and holiness. He seeks to bridge the divide by inviting Progressives and Traditionalists to understand each other anew. As he writes, “The best construction for conservatives to put upon the liberal analogy of gender, race, and sexual identity is not that it is a civil rights argument, but that it is a baptismal argument. Similarly, the best construction for liberals to put on the conservatives’ rejection of the analogy is not that it is primarily a rejection of civil rights, but that it shows primarily a desire for visible holiness.”⁴⁷⁵ Such a bridge creates opportunity and space to separate the pro-and-con arguments for same-sex

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 36.

marriage from cultural narratives and invites participants into a conversation about the best aspects of each side's position.

When it comes to identity, even if one can navigate the choppy waters of constructivist versus essentialist approaches, Rogers suspects that division is still likely to reign. As a result, he advocates for giving up the conversation about the origins of gay identity in favor of a more theological identity that encompasses gay and straight, alike. As he notes, so much may not depend on getting sexual identity correctly described, after all, if the disputants agree that some other identity is primary,⁴⁷⁶ by which he means baptismal identity. In a manner meant to humble participants on both sides, Rogers is quick to remind all that “Almost all current Christians are, in the biblical categories, Gentiles.”⁴⁷⁷ This reference to Gentiles means that almost all current Christians should understand what it means to have an identity that presents them as apart from God's providential care of the world through God's redemptive work in the world. More than just a case of trying to create sympathy for other groups who would be excluded, Rogers contends that our Gentile-turned-child status with God is substantive to our identity, our self-understanding, and our perceptions and uses of our bodies. Such a reminder of the Gentile-ness of the Church is meant to provide a narrative framework in which we might theologially understand both gay and straight bodies as suffering under the same curse, as well as blessed by the same grace. Or, as Rogers pens it, “For the Church to understand sex, it must lose a sense of entitlement and recover a sense of grace. For that reason, it is crucially necessary for the Church to acknowledge its overwhelmingly Gentile nature. For only thus will it come to lose its sense of entitlement and appreciate appropriately the grace of the God of Israel.”⁴⁷⁸ More

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 64.

than an intriguing, rhetorically powerful comparison between Gentile and gay Christians, Rogers pushes his reader to understand God's redemptive history as revealing some essential characteristics of who God is and, thus, who the Church is called to be. God is the God who inverts the expected through God's very identification with the marginalized, not because they are marginalized, but because who God is is revealed in such actions. As Rogers writes, regarding Paul's use of *para phusin* in Romans 1—that is, the “unnatural” state of Gentiles in relation to God, “Just as God saved flesh by taking it on and defeated death by dying, here God saves those who act in excess of nature by an act in excess of nature.”⁴⁷⁹

Having established a mutual identity and reviewed God's salvific, redemptive acts on behalf of unnatural bodies—that is, Gentile and not gay—Rogers moves toward the point of salvation and redemption, which is to live in holiness with God and one another. The maintenance of the “holy” in “holy matrimony” is often the purview of the Traditionalist argument, but in the same way in which Rogers granted the importance of identity—which is most commonly associated with the Progressive approach to theology—he now grants the primary Traditionalist agenda its due, going so far as to claim that Traditionalists “are really looking out for marriage and the family,”⁴⁸⁰ even if their opponents would think such claims as merely a disingenuous way in which to continue the oppression of gay people. While Rogers is genuine in his acceptance of the Traditionalist focus on holiness, he is unswerving in his criticism that “Heterosexual Christians have been such poor stewards of their almost unbelievably rich theology of marriage that they leave almost all of it to recover.”⁴⁸¹ Contrary the Traditionalist who focus on saving sex for marriage, which always and inevitably presents

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 68

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 68.

marriage as a means for self-fulfillment—a notion that is likely more indebted to Romantic liberalism than Christianity, Rogers refocuses his readers on the ascetic nature of marriage as a “practice of and for the community by which God takes sexuality up into God’s own triune life, graciously transforming it so as to allow the couple partially to model the love between Christ and the Church.”⁴⁸²

Contrary the functional theology of the Traditionalists, which again focuses on the self-fulfillment of the individual vis-à-vis the covenant/sacrament of marriage, Rogers wants us to understand that we do not and cannot find the meaning of our bodies apart from their participation in God’s triune life. In an interesting reversal, it is the celibate who witness to the value and purposes of bodies the most, as the celibate reveal “what sex is really for. It is for the experience of the body as gift. It is for the taking up of human beings by means of their bodies into the life of the One whose life is a perpetual movement of gift. It is for making the other an occasion of joy, as the life of the Trinity takes the other as an occasion of joy.”⁴⁸³ Once sex and marriage are understood in terms of God’s Trinitarian life, the differences between such seemingly radical opposing views such as marriage and monasticism begin to dissolve, for both the married and the monastic desire to be desired in such a way that this desire can only ever be met by God. The married are not to find their desirability in the eyes of their partner, gay or straight, but rather for those who are married, the desirability from and of their partner is a reminder that God desires us. Furthermore, God’s desire is a bodily one. As Rogers notes, “God does not leave my body out of God’s desire for me. That would be Gnostic.”⁴⁸⁴ The monastic learns of this desirability in the monastery and the married in marriage, but both must learn it in

⁴⁸² Ibid., 73.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 83.

order to grow in their sanctification. And neither path is better than the other once it is understood that marriage and sex “is not about satisfaction of sexual desires, but about a mutual sanctification by asceticism.”⁴⁸⁵

Rogers writes a compelling and thoroughgoing theological account of marriage and sex. In the process, he reveals how much of both the church and the culture’s understanding of these things are bound up in the fulfillment of the individual, rather than the sanctification of the church. In capitulating to individualistic narratives, largely indebted to Modernity, both Progressives and Traditionalists have lost the thread on the import of marriage and sex. Even still, vestiges of the former ways continue to cling to the debate, often giving the debate the emotional charge so characteristic to it. For Progressives, the idea that gay men and lesbian women might be denied access to marriage is a sin, but typically because it is viewed as incorrect to deny anyone a right. Rogers reminds us that gay men and lesbian women ought to be granted access to marriage, as a rite, but they must also be prepared to lose themselves—first, as their identity in their orientation gives way to their baptismal identity and, second, as their marriage becomes a means of sanctification rather than satisfaction. Per Traditionalists, marriage must be maintained in a certain way as to preserve the holiness that ought to come through this. However, they have lost the character of marriage in favor of the content of it—that is, they have lost track of the sanctifying purposes in favor of maintaining its construction as a male-female institution. What remains to be seen is whether anyone, gay or straight, would desire marriage as Rogers presents it, as his appeal to the ascetic life and sanctification runs counter to the satisfaction and self-fulfillment that undergirds most contemporary narratives on love, sex, and marriage. Of course, maybe what the debate around same-sex marriage in the church needs now, most of all,

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 84.

is a little bit of awe, a little more humility, and an increase in uneasiness in everyone's race to get married.

INCLUSION BY WAY OF MISSION

The Church's missiology is often viewed as only tangentially related to the discussion on same-sex marriage, save two approaches. Progressives will often claim that the Church has driven away membership—both gay and gay allies—with its anti-gay posture. Traditionalists will contend, especially those who reside in global communions, that the Church's international mission is harmed by same-sex marriage inclusion in the western European and North American churches. In both instances, it is apparent that the sanctity of the Church's missiology is only a tool for either creating or rejecting change to the Church's marital norms. These ham-fisted arguments are *not* what Craig L. Nesson pursues in his work, *Many Members Yet One Body*.⁴⁸⁶

Working specifically within and for an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) perspective, Nesson begins by relativizing this particular topic as “penultimate” when compared to the “ultimate” concern of justification by faith. This relativizing move serves to deescalate tensions and passions around same-sex marriage so as to foster space for a creative, missional view of the topic. He honestly acknowledges that compromise is not possible since the two positions—both Progressive and Traditionalist—are rooted in two, equally valid hermeneutics, and that each hermeneutic ultimately leads to a particular outcome that is contrary to one another. There is, simply put, no room to negotiate one's way out of the controversy. As such, he exhorts the church to an other-focused posture of mission. He defines mission as “that we are justified by grace through faith for the sake of Jesus Christ is the ultimate reason for the church's

⁴⁸⁶ Craig L. Nesson, *Many Members Yet One Body: Committed Same-Gender Relationships and the Mission of the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

existence.”⁴⁸⁷ Yet this turn toward mission may be the first place where his argument begins to fail, as he does not draw a connection between the Christian practice of marriage (or singleness, for that matter) and the Christian’s “justifi[cation] by grace through faith for the sake of Jesus Christ.” It is not, in his writing, that marriage rites are penultimate, and justification is ultimate, but rather that marriage rites are disconnected from justification. Indeed, this dearth of explanation severs the penultimate from the ultimate in such a manner that it can’t even rightly be called “penultimate” any longer. For a penultimate thing is such only in relation to the ultimate. Nesson does not explain the nature of the relationship between marriage and justification, leaving even an honest reader to question if there is one.

Instead, he proffers a local option on the matter in which each church is granted “a measure of autonomy in reading their own context for mission.”⁴⁸⁸ He goes on to say, “With regard to the blessing of committed same-gender partnerships, an individual congregation might be allowed to designate itself as prepared to offer such services of blessing, should it deem this is vital to its missionary outreach.”⁴⁸⁹ Of course, once again, having failed to present marriage as relevant to justification—and having defined mission in terms of justification alone—it is hard to understand how or why blessing same-sex unions could ever be considered “vital.”

Earlier in the text, Nesson presented three competing alternatives to how the Church responds to controversies in its midst—relativism, exclusivism, and catholic. It is simplest to quote his understanding of each:

- “[Relativism] is the conviction that truth—at least our human grasp of the truth—is finally relative. Every human person has a certain slice of the truth and no one has the

⁴⁸⁷ Nesson, 53.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 56.

whole truth. This means that it is imperative that we respect each and every opinion equally. There are no meta-narratives that provide a universal explanation of the truth. Tolerance, according to some forms of relativism, is the greatest of virtues. The only limit to tolerance involves the condemnation of all views that are themselves intolerant.”⁴⁹⁰

- “[Exclusivism] is historically the most common Protestant approach to dealing with differences. It is based on the conviction that our community has a privileged access to the truth.”⁴⁹¹ He also adds, “For most of Christian history, and especially Protestant history, the exclusivist approach has been lived out by stressing what makes us different from each other, rather than what we hold in common.”⁴⁹²
- “The catholic approach is based on commitment to certain core essentials of the faith, while allowing a range of views on non-essentials. The key to this approach, of course, is the capacity to reach agreement on what is essential and to let that suffice as the basis of unity, while permitting a range of views on what is deemed non-essential.”⁴⁹³

Where Nesson fails is to acknowledge that the Church has also, historically, opted—and maybe far more frequently than is realized—for a fourth, and much easier, alternative: *Syncretism*.

By syncretism, I mean an acceptance of a cultural value as an ecclesial value, often—interestingly—done under the premise that such a move will aid in mission. Indeed, Hauerwas’ frequent screeds against Constantinianism implicitly acknowledges that the Church was very much benefitted institutionally by becoming the predominant religion of the land. Under the rule of the Emperor Constantine, the Church was able to move from its furtive, secret worship in the

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 45.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 46.

catacombs to the building of tall, aspiring spires of a new temple for worshipping God. That people could now publicly be Christian without any risk meant that Christianity was free to grow. Of course, as Hauerwas also notes, nothing may have been worse in the Church's history than becoming a "public" religion in an institutional sense. Instead, the "public" value of Christian discipleship ought to be found in living lives that can only be intelligible if what Christians claim about their justification by faith for the sake of Jesus Christ is true. But, of course, this would require a both implicit and acknowledged relationship between the many "penultimates" of their lives (including their marriages) and the "ultimate" of their justification.

For even Nesson's argument that some churches might find it useful to their mission to bless same-sex unions presumes something odd about the presence of same-sex attracted individuals. Namely, that there might be some context—some parish—for which there are gay neighbors and others where there is not. Yet being gay is not regionally-exclusive—recognizing, of course, that certain communities have made themselves more hospitable to gay people and therefore gay folks have been drawn to them. And so, one wonders what context would *not* benefit from having gay Christian marriage rites in the Church. Of course, it *is* true that there are some communities and even regions where one would not necessarily feel comfortable or secure in coming out as gay or lesbian, but that is a result of an oppressive, sinful suppression of gay sexuality—often under the subtle threat of violence. And so, if a church finds itself in such a community or region, they are not necessarily pursuing the gospel of Jesus Christ by leaning on a sinful, cultural practice of suppression, oppression, and/or repression.

More often than not, when syncretism is cited in the "gay debate," it is leveled at Progressives as capitulating to cultural norms and even (at least post-*Obergefell* decision in the U.S. Supreme Court) laws. Yet the existence of homophobia as a cultural phenomenon means

that a syncretistic church can also capitulate to a culture of hate and fear. No aspect of Nesson's local option avoids this Constantinian syncretism—and it certainly does not challenge the church to be a prophetic witness against such inclinations and behaviors. That the Church is so disempowered is a result of cutting off marriage from the narrative of justification that gives it its intelligibility in the first place.

Yet the ultimate undoing of Nesson's argument may best be expressed in his guidance to pastors who are helping their churches navigate this particular topic. To pastors he writes, "a pastor is wise to make a clear, non-anxious statement of how she or he views a particular issue. In doing so, the use of 'I' statements is very important."⁴⁹⁴ He then goes on to add, "It also means that in dealing with controversial issues that one avoids defining any one viewpoint as *the* Christian or *the* Lutheran position."⁴⁹⁵ Given his definition of "relativism" above, it is unclear how this guidance avoids falling into such a trap. It further tries to explain a communal decision and discipline through an individual rationale, which not only is logically inconsistent, but potentially relationally destructive.

On the whole, missiology is probably a topic better left out of conversations on gay marriage, if only because the Church does not presently have a robust enough narrative or discipline about straight marriages and their connection to the Church's mission. Nesson's offering, potentially pragmatic in places, does little more than address this—using Wells' terms above—as a third sense understanding of the Church while almost willfully leaving first-sense questions unresolved. It is not, to be clear, that uniquely "third sense" articulations are unwanted or not useful, but rather that merely asserting "justification by faith" as an "ultimate" theological

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 62.

position without connecting this position with marriage—either opposite-sex or same-sex—does not rise to the level necessary to substantiate same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church.

INCLUSION BY WAY OF SCRIPTURE

Having reviewed three other ways in which same-sex marriage might be included in the religious, covenantal life of the church, it is now time to turn attention toward scripture itself. As will be seen, a similar enough pattern emerges in which texts that speak specifically about same-sex sexual activity are reviewed through a rigorous historical-critical approach that slowly erodes what would appear to be the simplest reading of the text for one that is more nuanced and culturally-sensitive—that is, sensitive to the cultural norms at work at the time of composition and not merely sensitive to the current culture. The works by L. William Countryman and Mark Achtemeier will more than demonstrate this pattern. Yet however similar the pattern that emerges is, a contrary one also emerges in which historical-critical scholarship is viewed suspiciously as a tool for the reification of oppression. The idea that scripture has one static meaning, which may be debated about but only to the end that one meaning should be decided upon, undergirds the assumptions behind historical-critical scholarship. Even more Progressive positions rest in allowing the meaning of scripture to flow out of the agency of the reader, which creates then a near-imperative to make sure there is a diversity of readers, especially in this chapter, gay readers. Such is the path mapped out by Dale Martin, who ultimately pushes the church to explore scripture through human experience.

While its subtitle claims a focus on the New Testament, L. William Countryman's *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*⁴⁹⁶ does look to Old Testament antecedents, including the prohibitions on male-male sexual contact in

⁴⁹⁶ L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

Leviticus 18 and 22. Countryman is concerned with the “why” behind the ethical codes, rules, and morals found in the New Testament, contending that the “why” is what moves a prescription or proscription into a full-blown ethic. As such, he finds the “why” to much of the Bible’s witness on sex to be rooted in conceptions of purity (“dirt”) and possession (“greed”). This movement to the “why” is shared by Traditionalist and Progressive, alike, with their respective interpretations quickly becoming their first point of departure from one another.

This seeking to answer “why” in terms of purity and possessions is precisely what we find when Countryman addresses the male-male sexual prohibitions in Leviticus. Taking both homosexual activity and cross-dressing together, he writes “both of these confuse a purer male with the more unclean female.”⁴⁹⁷ In other words, if women were regarded as equally pure (or impure, for that matter) as men, then these rules lose their “why” and likely don’t become rules at all. Countryman focuses this assertion on the very way in which the prohibition is described, “in literal translation, ‘lying with a male the lyings of a woman.’”⁴⁹⁸ Apparently, ancient Judaism understood “lyings” (read: sexual congress) as being qualitatively different between men and women. Furthermore, Countryman rejects the procreative principle claiming there is no explicit reference... to such a motive; at most, one can base such an argument on the context and organization of the materials. The Torah begins with a creation account emphasizing procreation (Gen. 1:26-28) and shows an ongoing interest in the topic, particularly as it leads from the first humans to the numerous descendants of Jacob/Israel. The narrower context of Leviticus 18, which combines regulations about incest with prohibitions of intercourse with a menstruating woman, child sacrifice, male-male anal intercourse, and intercourse with an animal, can then be

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 23.

read as expressing an overall concern for legitimate offspring.⁴⁹⁹ It is also easy to see how Countryman’s principle of possession (“legitimate offspring”) is reified in this reading.

Countryman also addresses the Romans 1 passage, boldly claiming, “the idea that Paul means to categorize same-gender sexual acts here as sinful is a presupposition brought to the text rather than being explicitly state there.”⁵⁰⁰ Arguing that consistently the church has brought anti-gay presuppositions to the text, Countryman attempts to translate it more even-handedly. The result is that certain words—*epithymia* (typically translated “lust,” but here translated as a more neutral “desire”), *pathos* and *orexis* (typically translated as “passion” and “desire,” respectively, but here translated the same with the note to not carry “either positive or negative connotations”⁵⁰¹)—are reduced in their affective meaning, while other words—*aschemosyne* (meaning “shamelessness”)—are freed to take a more prominent role. Shame, in particular, interests Countryman, who acknowledges that both Jewish and Gentile audiences would have been susceptible to the pejorative use of such a word, both coming from cultures in which “the most important social imperative was to maintain or improve the standing of one’s family.”⁵⁰² Yet, the pejorative is not necessarily the ethical and what Paul is stating in this passage is only further confused when he introduces new language: *para physin*.

Countryman understand Paul’s use of “natural/nature” as unique to his corpus of writings. As he writes, “In most instance, he uses the term to refer to the continuity of an organism with its past.”⁵⁰³ Thus Countryman understands Paul as saying that Gentiles had lost continuity with their past, namely that their previous heterosexual desires had been maligned by

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 112.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 112.

God as punishment for their idolatry. Countryman reads the Gentile homosexual relations as a form of retributive justice. While this is not, of course, good for the Gentiles, neither is it God's last word on them. Paul will later note another form of *para physin* in the life of Gentiles when he presents them as the wild branch that has, against nature, been grafted into Israel. In conclusion, then, Countryman writes, "While Paul wrote of same-gender sexual acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and 'over against nature,' he did not apply his extensive vocabulary for sin to them. Instead, he treated homosexual behavior as an integral if filthy aspect of Gentile culture. It was not in itself sinful but had been visited upon the Gentiles as recompense for sins."⁵⁰⁴

While many Traditionalists critique Progressives for a dismissive posture toward scripture, Countryman's work—and other's—demonstrates a deep commitment to scripture. Thus, one finds, the real disagreement is between exegetical assumptions and hermeneutical applications between the two sides, especially in each's attempts to seek the "why" behind the "what." To a more pastoral "why" approach, then, we should turn.

Mark Achtemeier's *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart*⁵⁰⁵ is "a spiritual travelogue" of a theologian's change in position on the issue of same-sex marriage in the church. As both a scholar and pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Achtemeier recounts spending many years advocating for a traditional understanding of sex and marriage. However, after an encounter with a bright, faithful, and committed seminarian who finds herself depressed, languishing, and entertaining suicidal thoughts because of her sexual identity, Achtemeier feels compelled to reinvestigate this topic he thought he understood so well.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁰⁵ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

The resulting pages recount his attempt to hold to the authority of scripture while trying to figure out why his supposedly biblically based view of sexuality would leave this young seminarian (and countless others similar to her) in such spiritual straits.

Undergirding Achtemeier's endeavor is the conviction that faithfulness is meant to lead to flourishing. He is, by no means, a "prosperity gospel" advocate, but rather that sacrificing for one's faith should lead to a greater intimacy with God, as well as a subsequent "strengthening and upholding... through times of hardship and suffering."⁵⁰⁶ Since his student's lived experience differed so greatly with his biblical expectations, he proceeded to review his biblical understanding to see if something was amiss there.

In turning to scripture, Achtemeier insists on adhering to principles of biblical interpretation as he had learned them from his Presbyterian tradition. These principles include (1) Coherent, Good Sense; (2) Christ-Centered Interpretation; (3) Interpreting Scripture by Scripture; (4) Interpreting Passages in Context; and (5) Understanding the Purpose of the Lawgiver. Yet, while Achtemeier does employ all of these principles at one point or another, he has a clear penchant for the first and last principles from the preceding list. And nowhere does he ever apply all five principles to any given verse, passage, or pericope of scripture.

Much of Achtemeier's work is dedicated to what he terms "the fragment texts." These are the seven passages that are most commonly referenced in conversations about the prohibition of same-sex marriage and/or intercourse. While he initially acknowledged that any good scriptural analysis should first seek the "big picture," he does still dedicate two chapters to addressing these "fragments" using the insights he's established in the preceding chapters. It is these chapters that most frequently employ his hermeneutical principle of interpreting passages in context. As such,

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 5.

his reading of Genesis 19 (Sodom and Gomorrah) is revealed to be about hospitality and a prohibition against gang rape. Much of the same is true for Judges 19 (the Levite and the raping of his concubine). The twin prohibitions found in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 must be viewed within the historical lens of same-sex sexual activity in ancient times. Achtemeier determines that a contemporary understanding of same-sex attraction/action is not the same as that of the ancient world. As he writes, “the world of the biblical writers had nothing that remotely resembles the loving, egalitarian, committed gay marriages and partnerships that we know today.”⁵⁰⁷ This “loving, egalitarian...” refrain is frequently found throughout Achtemeier’s book from this point forward and the difference between contexts is essential for his analysis. As it pertains, though, specifically to Leviticus, Achtemeier finds that he can affirm these passages in their general principle—the “condemnations of violent and idolatrous sexual behaviors”⁵⁰⁸—without regarding this passage as pertaining to gay relationships today. It would, however, have been nice—if not slightly afield—if Achtemeier could have noted what an “idolatrous sexual behavior” might look like in our contemporary context.

As Achtemeier transitions to New Testament texts, his emphasis on the different types of same-sex sexual activity—one from the ancient world and one from today—is thrown into even greater contrast. All of his analysis of the various vice lists—1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10—are hinged upon these different types. Regrettably, he does not provide any sort of side-by-side analysis of these different types to allow the reader to see that they are, indeed, different from one another. Yet however much Achtemeier dismantles traditional interpretations of these texts, he consistently finds that he can affirm the underlying principles behind them.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 83.

As he draws to his conclusion, Achtemeier can state plainly, “God desires to bless and sanctify same-gender relationships no less than heterosexual unions.”⁵⁰⁹ And if one has followed and agreed with Achtemeier’s analysis, it does seem impossible to arrive at any other conclusion. Yet this statement also reveals what is gravely lacking throughout Achtemeier’s work, namely, an explanation of the inverse—that is, how same-gender (and heterosexual) unions can bless and glorify God. This inversion is not insignificant because it reveals the unspoken presupposition of a rights-based ethic that lines nearly every page of this text. In Achtemeier’s attempts to secure gay marriage rights (and rites) in the church, he forgoes his opportunity to explore how gay marriages can be a blessing to God. This focus on receiving—rather than giving—actually finds its roots in his latent infralapsarian theology that views the incarnation as a means of saving humanity, rather than a supralapsarian view that would understand the incarnation as the means of greater communion between humanity and God. It also ignores his early assertion that sacrificing for one’s faith ought to lead to flourishing in one’s relationship with God, which should include a sense that one’s marriage is both blessed by God and a blessing to God. It is also worth noting that any rights-based ethic is always reified—rightly or otherwise—by an American, political system of rights. Thus, it is unclear how Achtemeier is more than a by-product of his own time (like all those “fragments” from the Old and New Testaments are by-products of their own context). This is not to claim that Achtemeier has become syncretistic in his thinking, but rather that he appears unaware of the ways he has been formed by his culture. The problems are less with what he says and more with what he doesn’t appear to notice at all.

In the end, Achtemeier is a fine case study in much Progressive Christian thinking on sexuality. He relies heavily on principles that are scripturally derived out of which he can address

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 105.

a contemporary context that is inherently foreign to the world of scripture. He also shows a clear prejudice toward “rights” over responsibilities, which is itself a common component of Progressive thinking.

Both Achtemeier and Countryman follow similar patterns in coming to their similar conclusions. However, theirs is not the only approach for seeking inclusion of same-sex marriage in the church as the following author will demonstrate. Indeed, Achtemeier’s and Countryman’s approach seems nearly Traditionalist compared to Dale B. Martin because the former two are foundationalists, while Martin is antifoundational.

Martin’s *Sex and the Single Savior*⁵¹⁰ is a radical departure from a lot of progressive Christian writing on sex and sex ethics. Whereas both of the authors reviewed thus happily employ historical-critical scholarship to gain their conclusions, Martin does not. Martin is an advocate for antifoundationalism. For Martin, these twin dangers—what he calls textual foundationalism and historical criticism—are both too laden with inconsistencies to be of much use in ethical deliberations. Foundationalism “often leads to unethical practices because it masks the very real interpretive agency of the human interpreter and thus allows the interpreter to avoid responsibility for the truth, goodness, morality, and social effect of her or his interpretation.”⁵¹¹ While “the modern method of historical criticism, though certainly a useful tool, cannot be depended on to deliver secure, ethical interpretations of Scripture.”⁵¹² Much of this work, then, is dedicated to proving this thesis, though Martin does provide a conclusion that points beyond these limiting methods. It is worth noting here that Martin reads much more like Hauerwas, though difference will still remain.

⁵¹⁰ Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 16.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

Martin begins his chapter titled “Community-shaped Scripture” by analyzing two works by Richard B. Hays—*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (1989) and *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (1996)—which provide two proposals for how the church should read scripture. In the first, Martin reads Hays as proposing we read scripture with the same hermeneutical freedom that Paul employed in his letters, a freedom “that is unconstrained by the methods of modern historical criticism, along with an assertion that it is perfectly permissible for modern interpreters to follow Paul’s lead in such interpretive freedom.”⁵¹³ In the latter text, Martin reads Hays as calling “for modern Christians to allow the biblical texts to shape modern Christian identity.”⁵¹⁴ The notion, then, that Christians have freedom in biblical interpretation, while they should simultaneously be shaped by scripture creates a dialogic that Martin spends the rest of the chapter engaging.

The result of this engagement is Martin’s rejection of the popular notion of the church as a ‘Scripture-shaped community’ and instead he posits a ‘community-shaped Scripture.’ The heart of the problem, though, is not with scripture per se, but with the foundationalist presuppositions that many interpreters bring to scripture, in which it is a constant, static thing that exists to mold Christians into its image. On the contrary, for Martin, Christians’ experiences with the Word (Jesus Christ) molds the very content and meaning of scripture. While it may appear that Martin supplants the high place of scripture with experience, his argument is much more phenomenological. As he writes, “Every time we read a text we are experiencing. Readings of texts are part of our human experience, not something separate from it that can then serve as a control over experience.”⁵¹⁵ Thus he rejects this dualism. Moreover, he sees this dualism as part-

⁵¹³ Ibid., 150-151.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 151.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 157.

and-parcel of a greater, presuppositional dualism of opposing “Christ” and “culture.” Here, he is worth quoting at length:

Supposedly, liberals are those people who succumb to the truth claims of culture, while conservatives eschew dependence on culture by going to the Bible of Christ for their values and knowledge. Christ-against-culture rhetoric has been a staple in the ‘culture wars’ over ethics and the Bible, usually—though not exclusively—appropriated by conservatives against more progressive positions on topics from sex to divorce to ‘family values,’ and many others. Those Christians advocating a change in ethics for sexuality, in this portrait, are supposedly abandoning Christian values and giving in to dominant, secular, or Enlightenment, or just ‘popular’ ideas. Culture is set up as something negative or dispensable, and opposed to ‘Christ’ and ‘Christian values.’⁵¹⁶

Instead, everything said about Christ is culture because language is culture and there is just no escaping culture. Scripture does not stand outside of culture but is part of it.

The result of this line of reasoning allows Martin to draw a parallel between Gentile inclusion and gay inclusion in the church. Just as Gentiles did not stop being Gentiles, but were instead grafted into Israel, while still not becoming Jewish (as would have required, for example, circumcision), so neither does it hold that gay or lesbian Christians have to stop being gay or lesbian when they are grafted into the Body of Christ. The litmus is not what Scripture says, but what the Holy Spirit has done. If a gay man or lesbian woman has received the Spirit, then this experience becomes the mean by which scripture is to be interpreted. As Martin writes, “the experience of the Spirit in the lives of Christians attempting to follow the leading of the Spirit *is* a valid means for Christian ethical reasoning, and it imitates the model of ethical reasoning and scriptural interpretation practiced by the apostle Paul.”⁵¹⁷ This focus on the role and effect of the Spirit is frequently lacking in much Traditionalist writing, while it is emphasized considerably in the best Progressive offerings.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 159.

Martin concludes his work by reviewing his central points—“texts don’t mean; people mean with texts”⁵¹⁸ and “we need to move beyond the false claims of modernism that looked to the text of the Bible as a reliable and objective ‘source’ for knowledge or as a ‘foundation’ for ethics”⁵¹⁹—by first trying to define his own method and then, in a nice postmodern turn, rejecting his method. The method he claims to use is that of “Postmodern Christian Historicism.” It is “historicism” to the degree that he employs the tools of historical-critical insight, though he does so without granting authority to the Modernist presuppositions that undergird historical-critical analysis. This rejection of the Modernist presuppositions—especially the presumption of certainty and security—is what marks his method as “Postmodern.” Finally, it is Christian because he regards scripture as “Scripture” only when “it is *taken* to be Scripture—holy writing, the ‘word of God,’ ‘inspired’—by the church, the community of Christians, the communion of the saints.”⁵²⁰

This final point about employing a method that is intentionally Christian and takes the Christian community seriously for the reading and analyzing of texts requires Martin to interface with Postliberal theologians like Hans Frei and Hauerwas. With these thinkers, he engages in some cautious agreement. Following Frei, for example, he continues to reject the historical-critical method that inevitably displaces the centrality of scripture for the history behind it. Similarly, he rejects any “propositional, historical, or ethical statement about truth”⁵²¹ that someone claims exists behind the text. His repeated mantra is “the meaning of Scripture is Scripture.”⁵²² He notes that the meaning of scripture is better understood in the “performance” of

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 161-162.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 164.

⁵²² Ibid., 164.

scripture through song, dance, communal reading, processions, other liturgical acts, and through painting, stained-glass, and architecture. “The ‘meaning of Scripture,’” Martin summarizes, “is in the performance of Scripture, in the reading of Scripture itself – in the varied and unending ways in which we imagine ‘reading’ taking place.”⁵²³ As he presents it, this approach to scripture is in keeping with Postliberal sympathies.

Where he breaks with the Postliberals—citing, especially, Hauerwas—is in his encouragement to use “an ethic of love as a ruling guide for our interpretations of Scripture.”⁵²⁴ He notes that Hauerwas has argued against this sort of attempt and counters each of Hauerwas’ rebuttals. It should be noted here that Martin does not presume that “love” is foundational; he is “not claiming, that is, that ‘love’ can serve as a dependable and predictable source for ethical knowledge.”⁵²⁵ He then counterattacks by claiming that Hauerwas—and those who follow his method—“has too often implied a foundationalism of ‘the community’ and ‘the story.’”⁵²⁶ Of course, as should be clear from earlier chapters in this dissertation, Hauerwas’ methodology is too active—always moving between narrative, community, and character—to be settled into foundationalist claims about it. Without his rejection of Hauerwas’ theological ethics, it is unclear if Hauerwas’ critique of “an ethic of love” does or does not disarm Martin’s own approach. Even still, Martin’s understanding of Scripture, generally and in terms of the same-sex marriage debate in the Church, does align with much of Hauerwas’ understanding of the narrative of Scripture and is useful for dismissing more biblicist appeals of Traditionalists and the historical-critical reappraisals, as provided by Countryman and Achtemeier.

⁵²³ Ibid., 165.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 166.

All three of these biblical scholars understand scripture as presenting a warrant for the inclusion of same-sex marriages in the practices and rites of the Church. They differ in some ways but share some key similarities—most notably the linking of Gentile inclusion in the Church to gay marriage inclusion in the Church. (This is also a theme that Rogers notes, though in a more theological manner, above). What is lacking, though, in each of these works is a more comprehensive, biblical metanarrative for sex and marriage. Focus on scriptural “fragments” means that Traditionalist critiques of same-sex marriages have set the tone and priority for the conversation, almost as if—if only these scholars could achieve a certain re-reading of scripture—the central problem would go away, and everyone would agree. And this may be true, except that they have not interpreted the whole of scripture, but only “fragments.” From a Hauerwasian perspective, this debate is bound to fail. As Hauerwas says, “For me, it’s not going to turn on any one biblical text.”⁵²⁷ It is to this task, then, that the next chapter will turn.

CONCLUSION

As was noted at the outset, not every inclusive posture toward same-sex marriage in the Church is equal in standing and utility. Appeals for inclusion from justice and scripture are especially fraught with internal incoherence. “Justice” is too mired in cultural narratives, typically about “rights” in a Western setting, to do little more than reify Modern liberalism. Appeals to Scripture tend to allow Traditionalists to set the agenda in how this topic is engaged, which puts those who would advocate for such a significant sea change in the Church’s tradition at a disadvantage. The result is long-winded, never-ending debates about various fragments of scripture that ultimately devolve into mere assertions about the correct exegetical and hermeneutical tools necessary for correct interpretation. In an ironic twist, attempts to either

⁵²⁷ *BIH*, 189.

include or exclude gay Christians from Christian marriage via appeals to Scripture, very quickly cease to be about Scripture at all. While a missiological approach was, at the very least, unique and potentially helpful insofar as it sought to employ Farley's insistence that the Church cannot talk about marriage and sex directly, but only in their relationships to something more, Nesson's particular approach was too devoid of connection between his "ultimate" focus on "justification by faith" and his "penultimate" topic of marriage—gay or straight. A more direct connection between the two is necessary. Favorably, just such a connection is scouted out by Rogers' theology of the body, which seeks to situate marriage—again, gay or straight—within the life of the Triune God, linking together the bodies in the marriage with the Body of Christ (both Church and Eucharist) and, thereby, demonstrating the ascetic nature of marriage. Of any of the above approaches, "inclusion by way of theology" is the most hopeful. Indeed, the next chapter will return to Rogers as it seeks, especially, to connect same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church to Hauerwas' central foci of community and character.

What is clear from this survey of literature, though, is that no one approach—barring, only possibly, Rogers'—is sufficient to the task set before it, namely, to advocate for a tradition-altering inclusion of same-sex marriage in the Church. And, again, such a change is worthy of only the best arguments in favor for it. Indeed, that many denominations have already made these changes at the polity level without necessarily having a robust enough theology for it has only exacerbated tensions and furthered divisions into full-on schisms. The hope, then, of the next chapter is to utilize Hauerwas' theological methodology, with its focus on narrative, community, and character, to substantiate that which has already occurred at the polity-level of many traditions and denominations. It is further hoped that unity—or, where necessary, reunification—within denominations and traditions can be inspired by this approach, and that all

these breathless debates outlined above can be ended while still making space for gay Christian marriages.

Chapter Four

Same-Sex Marriage: Pursuing a Hauerwasian Theology of Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

As was noted in a previous chapter, Hauerwas' perspective on same-sex marriage is rarely about such marriages at all, but about those assumptions and institutions that give marriage any meaning in the first place. Readers, therefore, who are seeking a simple inclusion/exclusion position might find themselves confused. Indeed, there may even be some evolution in Hauerwas' work on this point. This perspective will be reviewed, chronologically, below, but the thesis of this chapter is not found in merely recounting Hauerwas' perspective. Rather, I contend that working out of a Hauerwasian theological ethics—focusing on community, character, and especially with this topic, narrative—creates more than enough space for the inclusion of same-sex attracted individuals to marry within Christ's Church. Of course, as Hauerwas has explained it, marriage is simultaneously unnecessary and a significantly meaningful commitment, and both of these lines of his thinking will be followed. By no means do gay Christians have to marry. Indeed, they—like many straight Christians—ought to seriously consider otherwise. But if the vocation of singleness is not placed upon their lives and a call to marriage is, then there is no reason the Church cannot sanctify, support, and celebrate these unions. There is no reason the Church cannot bless them and, in return, be blessed by them.

After a review of Hauerwas' muddled position on same-sex marriage, taken chronologically, only two additional subsections are needed in this chapter—one that will explore the biblical narrative and present a robust enough understanding of marriage and sex as to be inclusive for same-sex Christians and another that will pursue a pastoral-communal theology for marriage and sex that will demonstrate the character and community necessary for

same-sex marriage inclusion. The narrative section is my own unique contributions to biblical debates around same-sex marriage, pursued in a like manner to Hauerwas, especially his theological commentary on Matthew. Unlike this work, I will not be constrained to a single book in the Bible, but will (re)read the Scripture, allowing its major themes to provide the interpretive lens through which to read one of its minor theme, marriage. The pastoral-communal subsection will be aided greatly by two intellectual (and, at least in one instance, actual) friends to Hauerwas' way of doing theology. First, though, that review of Hauerwas' position.

A REVIEW OF HAUERWAS' POSITION

Hauerwas' first written essay on anything even coming close to addressing same-sex marriage or gay Christians can be found in "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)." This essay, originally published as an op-ed piece in a local newspaper, is much less about same-sex relations than it is about war and American Christian's moral incoherence around this topic. Of course, given Hauerwas' firm Christian pacifist convictions, it almost makes sense that he would come to address any other "hot button" ethical issue first and foremost through the lens of war and pacifism. This approach is made all the more likely given the then-prohibition against gays serving in the military. As Hauerwas keenly observes, "Discrimination against gays grows from the moral incoherence of our lives; people who are secure in their convictions and practices are not so easily threatened by the prospects of a marginal group acquiring legitimacy through military service."⁵²⁸ This essay was addressed in the previous chapter, as was Hauerwas' review of it twenty years later, so not much more needs to be said here except to note that, for Hauerwas, the means of addressing same-sex relationships in the Church is not through some sense of scriptural adherence nor through appeals to tradition,

⁵²⁸ "Why Gays," *HR*, 519.

but rather in how such relationships may or may not participate in the building of Christian character that often goes by the name sanctification. This “may or may not” is an honest, open question for Hauerwas; it is not given as an ultimatum for same-sex marriage inclusion, or—if it does have a certain ultimatum tone to it—it is an ultimatum placed equally on the shoulders of gay and straight Christians alike, since singleness is the first discipline of Christian discipleship with marriage given largely as a concession. At the very least, it is clear that Hauerwas is going to pursue this topic on rather novel grounds—grounds which should appear all the more novel after the previous review of other justifications for same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church.

Hauerwas first directly addresses the tension around gay Christians and same-sex marriages in the Church in his 1996 essay, “Gay Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology.”⁵²⁹ Yet even here, he resists the cultural and ecclesial energies that were (and are) drawing so many to this particular topic. Comparing this topic to other issues that were raging at the beginning of his career—chief amongst them was the war in Vietnam—and recognizing that all too often the standard methodological approach of “concentrate[ing] on sex, and in particular sexual acts,”⁵³⁰ he “resisted the presumption that this was a matter on which I had to have a ‘position.’”⁵³¹ His ultimate turn to the topic is a result of friendship, understood in two ways. First, he found his life blessed by gay Christians that he could call friends. Second, he found within friendship—especially an Aristotelian understanding of it—a methodological approach that could actually be useful for the upbuilding of the Church, as well as the sanctification of the lives of his gay Christian friends. Only under this rubric, then, does he deign to speak on the topic at all.

⁵²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Gay Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology” in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 111-128.

⁵³⁰ “Gay Friendship,” *STT*, 111.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

Much of the essay is couched in terms of the then-recently published papal encyclical, *Veritas Splendor*, whose specific content is not relevant to understanding the position that Hauerwas ultimately develops, but rather as a means of deconstructing the notion of “intrinsic evil,” which is an essential step to take in “a thought experiment in Catholic Moral Theology,” since same-sex attraction and sex acts are regarded as “intrinsically disordered” in Roman Catholic teaching. Having suitably cleared space for ethical reflection unburdened by the “intrinsic,” Hauerwas can present the crux of the matter, which he borrows from Aristotle’s understanding of friendship. As he writes, “For Aristotle friendship is not just a necessity for living well, but necessary if we are to be people of practical wisdom. Through character-friendships we actually acquire the wisdom necessary, and in particular the self-knowledge, to be people of virtue. We literally cannot do good without our friends, not simply because we need friends to do good for but because the self-knowledge necessary to be good comes from seeing ourselves through our friendships.”⁵³² That the Church continues to produce, maybe against all odds, gay men and women who are also faithful and that non-gay Christians are their friends, then the virtuous growth of non-gay Christians is pegged, at least in part, to their friendship with gay Christians. As Hauerwas notes, “if ‘being gay’ names an immoral practice, then surely being a friend of gay people would not be a wise policy for those who would be moral.”⁵³³ And yet if no church teaching (either in the Roman Catholic tradition or anything but the most fringe Protestant traditions) would discourage such friendship, then some communal space must be made for the lives of gay Christians to be a blessing in and for the Church.

All this, of course, does not get to whether gay Christians can marry. For this Hauerwas presents his understanding of marriage (which was highlighted in chapter two) as being a place

⁵³² Ibid., 123-124.

⁵³³ Ibid., 124.

for the growth of Christian virtue and as being open to the reception of children. These children, of course, do not have to be received through procreative, biological means, as adoption is not only a legitimate, but theologically rich alternative. Additionally, as Hauerwas notes, the Church routinely makes space for the marriages of those past procreative age. In both instances then, the older, non-childbearing couple and the gay couple have an opportunity to help the Church rediscover just how “our presumption as Christians that marriage is constituted by a promise of lifelong monogamous fidelity... [is] a life-giving promise.”⁵³⁴ For just as Hauerwas confronts the notion of “intrinsic evil,” so too does this bring a suspicion of any claim to a thing being intrinsically good. Instead, same-sex marriage—and all marriages—are good only as the Church takes an “account of the interrelation of practices and their correlative virtues, the narratives that render such practices and virtues intelligible, and the institutions necessary to sustain such narratives.”⁵³⁵ As a result, gay couples in the Church may be able to embody a relationship that is at least “analogous to marriage.”⁵³⁶

“Analogous to marriage” is not likely to sate the desires of any Progressive seeking a full-throated gay inclusion in the Church and is likely only politely acknowledged by gay Christians themselves. Yet just as soon as we would hope to push Hauerwas further and clearer, his next bit of writing on the matter—“Resisting Capitalism: On Marriage and Homosexuality”⁵³⁷—retreats away from the topic in a manner akin to the “Why Gays...” essay above. This time, though, instead of the American penchant for war and violence, Hauerwas has swapped in capitalism as the culprit for the Church’s moral incoherence on the topic of same-sex

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 127.

⁵³⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, “Resisting Capitalism: On Marriage and Homosexuality” in *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 47-51.

marriage. For in capitalism, “we fail to see that the debate about ‘sexual identities’ simply reflects the construction of our bodies by economic forces that make us willing consumers capable of producing nothing.”⁵³⁸ This moral burden is true in the lives of gay Christians, but also—and maybe especially—straight Christians for whom “the churches have generally underwritten romantic accounts of marriage—that is, you fall in love and get married so that sex is an expression of your love.”⁵³⁹ Marriage, love, and sex so understood cannot help but fall victim to economic influences in which consumption, rather than production, is the norm. For Hauerwas, as has been noted before, the “product” of Christian marriage is the space open to receiving children, which can be biologically achieved in healthy, straight marriages, but is no less a moral duty for *all* Christians and for whom gay relationships, childless marriages, and marriages past child-bearing years can all serve as a faithful, symbolic witness to this duty. It is, again, about the character of these relationships that matters most to Hauerwas, not their ontology. This continued return to character is, again, a reminder for Hauerwas that “I know my life and my church’s life are enriched by members of the church who tell me they are gay.”⁵⁴⁰

The rest of Hauerwas’ engagement on this topic is reserved for recorded and printed conversations with theological friends, which were noted in chapter two. One of those conversations, however, proves particularly helpful to Hauerwas in framing this discussion. In talking with his friend, Samuel Wells, Wells presents a heuristically rich understanding of the church in three senses:

[First,] it is the place where God and time meet—the living example of witness of the incarnation, fully human and fully divine. It is one of the meanings of the body of Christ, just as the Eucharist and Jesus are among the meanings of the body of Christ. Secondly, it is a community of people with all their shortcomings and failings, striving to live an ideal, and forgive, and live heaven now, praying on earth as it is in heaven. And thirdly,

⁵³⁸ “Resisting Capitalism,” *BH*, 50.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

it's all the accoutrements related to institutions, involving synods and conventions and money sent from one congregation to a central body, and bishops, World Council of Church, all of that.⁵⁴¹

Of course, given Hauerwas' (and Wells') commitment to thick narrative accounts of community, especially the Church, such distinctions are not meant to imply fully independent modes of being, but rather is an attempt to tidy up the messy complexities of ecclesial life in which each of these senses overlap and interact with one another in a myriad of ways. It is an especially helpful heuristic to the degree that it allows us to see that the church debate around same-sex marriage takes place in certain senses more than others. As Wells notes, "the conversation has obviously been significantly around number three: how can a denomination hold together?"⁵⁴² The tensions arise, however, because "churches where people have changed their mind"⁵⁴³ often employ the second sense of the Church, that is, the place of intermingling relationships with disciples who each bring varied and varying levels of commitment and faithfulness. Specifically Wells has in mind the example of "parents [who] have made a journey that they still love their son or daughter, and the love of their daughter and son has over time become more important to them than whatever they thought were core convictions about sexuality and its expression."⁵⁴⁴ And yet, Wells wants "to say [that] we really have to treat this as a number one issue"⁵⁴⁵—that is, that the sanctity of marriage, gay or otherwise, is found in the manner in which it participates as a living witness to God meeting time in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Wells' keen pastoral insight is that a number one issue has been raised by number two concerns and only/primarily addressed by number three mechanisms. So understood, "moral incoherence" only begins to

⁵⁴¹ *IC*, 116.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

describe the troubles ailing the Church around same-sex marriage. For Wells, “the day-to-day work in ministry is in number two, but the real issues about LGBTQ+ are about creation and eschatology, and therefore they’re about the original purpose of God and particularly the final ingathering. If you believe that ultimately God will find a place for all of us then the church’s role is to imitate now that final eschatological community.”⁵⁴⁶

Hauerwas embraces Wells’ approach, so much so that he goes on to say that “one of the interesting ways to think about it is that the gay demand for marriage may save marriage.”⁵⁴⁷ For it is in the gay demand for marriage that the Church is forced to reckon on communal levels (number two) with what it actually believes (number one), which may very well be quite different than what it practices or permits to be practiced (number three). At the root of all this is Hauerwas’ ongoing concern that divorce and remarriage have done more to harm Christian marriage than any gay couple could ever achieve, which might just be a way of saying that apathy at the number two sense of Church created formal polity at the number three sense of Church that our number one sense of theology can never justify. As a result, gay exclusion really does appear to be little more than a homophobic, knee-jerk reaction against those whose lives would challenge the self-deceptions the Church has so readily embraced.

In the end, Hauerwas’ position is likely less important than his approach to same-sex marriage. That sentence, of course, can likely only be written by a privileged person about a privileged person, for the gay Christians who continue to struggle under the burden of the Church’s moral incoherence—and, more importantly, those who remain heroically invested in the Church in spite of the harms directed toward them—would not be so quick to dismiss the position for the approach. And so, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to securing the

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 120.

position that same-sex marriage is orthodox in the Church, while also still being committed to critically engaging and evaluating the approach to this end. This is done so in order to make sure the number one sense of the Church (to borrow from Wells) is equally in line with our numbers two and three ordering of the Church. Only when a harmony and unity between the three senses have been achieved can gay and straight Christians, alike, be challenged to embody marriages that anticipate God's final, eschatological victory over death and witness to this Good News in how these marriages are lived out.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Hauerwas' position on same-sex marriage is ambiguous enough to allow space for further engagement and additional insight. What follows, then, is an attempt to read the scriptures as a metanarrative in a manner that has been informed by Hauerwas' biblical ethics. Simply put, the goal is to read the Bible as Hauerwas would read the Bible, which is deeply rooted in Hays' "Symbolic world" mode of appeal. The hope of this subsection is to satisfy the narrative accounting for same-sex marriage necessary to make the practice intelligible to and in the Church.

Taking seriously Farley's exhortation to focus on anything other than sex, if one is to speak cogently on sex, it is important to begin by finding or inserting such a focus. Given that issues around marriage and sex have divided churches and denominations, the theme of unity seems particularly poignant. This is not to say that unity is the interpretive key to understanding the Bible's many positions and representations of faithful marriage and sex, but rather that such a theme will remind the reader of the required end goal of their reading of scripture. The challenge is stated well in Philippians 2:1-4, in which Paul writes, "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make

my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Paul captures this same theme in his letter to the church in Ephesus, exhorting them thusly: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6). Under the burden of such radical unity, it is difficult to understand church schism as somehow being less morally reprehensible to God than any fumbling sex act two people could achieve between the sheets. Furthermore, any conversation about a biblical view of marriage and sex is bound to the rigors of “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” a call that is rarely sought and even less rarely achieved in the raging debates on this topic.

While many biblical accounts of marriage and sex root themselves in the creation narratives, often blending the injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1) in the first account with the “one flesh” (Genesis 2) of the second account—and rarely acknowledging that these are different stories—it is better to begin elsewhere, namely with eunuchs⁵⁴⁸. Framed in terms of the aim of unity noted above, if eunuchs and non-eunuchs can be bound together by the

⁵⁴⁸ Why I’ve chosen to start with eunuchs will be fully explained over the coming pages, but it must be noted from the outset that eunuchs are not being presented as some sort of ancient analog to contemporary LGBTQIA individuals. To be sure, some scholars—clearly in an effort to gain a biblical basis for queer inclusion in the Church—have made such arguments (cf. Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006], 82). While sympathetic with the end goals of this approach, I regard the analogy as too historically weak and sociologically dubious to carry such an argument.

work, will, and grace of God, then any and all gay/straight divisions in the Church are bound to be easily dissolved.

To say that eunuchs were a lower-class citizen is an understatement. Deuteronomy 23:1 lays down a clear injunction against their participation in the worshipping life of Israel when it states, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Cut off from the assembly, they cannot make atoning sacrifices for their sins and the unatoned accumulation of these sins would forever cast these eunuchs into a state of deeper and deeper impurity, eventually cutting them off from even the civic and economic life of Israel. As if not to be outdone, Leviticus extends the rejection of eunuchs from humans to even animals, as is recorded in the twenty-second chapter: “An ox or a lamb that has a limb too long or too short you may present for a freewill offering; but it will not be accepted for a vow. Any animal that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to the Lord; such you shall not do within your land, nor shall you accept any such animals from a foreigner to offer as food to your God; since they are mutilated, with a blemish in them, they shall not be accepted in your behalf” (Leviticus 22:23-25). The consistency of injunctions against eunuchs would seemingly support a conservative ethic built around differences, yet *why* these injunctions exist goes unquestioned and unanswered (though they will be), and more importantly the consistency does not hold. For no sooner does Israel accommodate itself to these ethical imperatives than a new word from God comes via the prophet Isaiah, who writes “For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:4-5). This passage is emphatic in its support of those eunuchs who achieve moral successes in other

areas of life, even going so far as to insert a pun about how they “shall not be cut off.” While easily understood as a crass joke in the mouth of anyone other than God, we do well to read within this final clause a figurative reversal or restoration: Those who had been cut off because a part of them had been cut off would now, no longer, be cut off. Yet even still, it should be clear that God’s reversal is a contingent one, rooted in moral excellence and thus could be read as a stylized version of the oft-used Christian adage “Love the sinner; hate the sin.” However, the story of eunuchs is not over.

Moving into the New Testament, we find Jesus citing eunuchs as potential beacons of faithfulness. Matthew 19:9-12 records a conversation between Jesus and His disciples: “‘And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.’ His disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’ But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.’” What begins in a conversation about another topic of marital ethics—namely, divorce—extends itself into a prophetic word on the status of eunuchs. Significantly, Jesus takes the time to nuance the types of eunuchs present in the civic and religious life of Israel in His time. He acknowledges the disciples’ shocked cry that maybe one ought not to marry by implicitly affirming the moral goodness of this option, a theme to which Hauerwas’ emphasis on singleness is clearly indebted. Recasting all unmarried people as “eunuchs,” we can symbolically regard singleness as a state of having never found a mate (“who have been so from birth”), or of having lost a spouse (“who have been made eunuchs by others”), or who have opted to not marry for religious purposes (“who have made themselves

eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”). This final category of eunuch is the most shocking when we remember how previously being a eunuch was to automatically be cut off from the assembly of the Lord. Thus, what was once unable to be present with God is now capable of especially choosing God. This sort of reversal would seemingly support liberal Christians and their assertions that the new covenant found in Christ creates room for sexual minorities who were once excluded. Yet the story is not done here.

As narrative evidence that eunuchs can, indeed, be part of God’s Kingdom, the Acts of the Apostles records the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. As Luke tells it: “Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah [53:7-8]” (Acts 8:26-30). Adding to the shock of this story is the presence of not only a eunuch, but a Gentile eunuch. Yet this is still the one to whom the Spirit leads Philip, and the passage Philip finds this Ethiopian reading is but a few chapters away from God’s aforementioned promise to eunuchs that they do, indeed, have a place in God’s walls. The early church’s inclusion of this story cannot be definitively said to serve as a proof of Jesus’ prior teaching, but a canonical reception of it is free to draw this connection across authors and books of the New Testament. Philip’s Spirit-led mission to this eunuch finds its fulfillment in the eunuch’s baptism, thus signaling that it is not bodily integrity that permits one entrance into the promises of God, but rather having one’s body marked and sealed as God’s own. Furthermore, this culmination in baptism reminds the

church—as noted in the unity passages at the outset—that the Church is now one with this Gentile eunuch. There is room enough for him too⁵⁴⁹.

Beginning with eunuchs makes it tempting to supply an allegorical reading in which the eunuch's status as a sexual minority in his time and place is used to provide a pathway for the inclusion of the sexual minorities we may encounter in our culture and church today. It is, indeed, a tempting interpretation and not one without some merits, but its truer utility is in rupturing the narratives of those who would presume consistency and continuity from beginning to end on any and all matters of sexual and marital ethics. Such claims, so often done under the presumption of honoring and respecting scripture, fail to account for the full witness of scripture and, thus, fail to demonstrate the honor and respect they intend. Yet the truest utility of eunuchs for a conversation on Christian marital and sex ethics can only be found once we return to ignored question as to “why” eunuchs were cut off from Israel's religious life in the first place. It is to that topic, then, that we must turn.

Too often, the rules, regulations, and laws recorded throughout scripture, and especially in the Old Testament, are presented without much of a rationale. There is a certain sort of fideism required by a would-be adherent and in the worst cases, Christian communities have

⁵⁴⁹ Countryman's understanding of eunuchs is helpful to note here. As he writes, “Mediterranean antiquity, whether Jewish or Gentile, did not take the individual as its basic building block. The value of each individual—so fundamental to modern democracy—was inconceivable in that context. In its place stood the value of the family, which was the basic social unit. The eunuch and the bastard, who were truly individuals, incapable of being related to a family, were permanently excluded from the assembly of Israel (Deut. 23:1-2); they had no place in a society where the family was the fundamental unit” (Countryman, 146-147). If eunuchs are previously understood as “incapable of being related to a family,” then their baptism into the Triune God—a “family” of love in its own right—is both a reversal of expectation for eunuchs *and* a radical act of inclusion. Again, though, this is not to assert an analogical relationship between eunuchs and contemporary queer people. Rather, the divine *reason* for including eunuchs serves as a rupturing of any sort of monolithic, singular, heteronormative reading of scripture from beginning to end. In this reading, the act of baptism is a sort of new genesis in a person's life. Just as humans pass through the amniotic waters for their birth, so they pass through baptismal waters in their rebirth. To this end, then, Mark D. Jordan comes close to making a similar argument when he writes, “. . . it is easy to understand that Christian readers would have taken the saying about eunuchs [in Matthew 19] as a call to discipleship in a life beyond sex.” (Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* [Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2002], 49).

created significant spiritual shame in the lives of those who seek God's underlying purpose for the rules given. For example, one may read "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Leviticus 18:22) or "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (Leviticus 20:13) and be required to accept that this prohibition against same-sex intimacy is to be observed without recourse as to why. For those gay and lesbian members of Christ's body who have felt that it was all rather arbitrary, this fideism only dampens their spirits that much more.

Accordingly, then, it is necessary to understand the role of sex and marriage in the broader narrative of God's relationship with God's people. And, indeed, both play a significant role, beginning with the very foundation of Israel through the call of Abram. As Genesis records it, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Genesis 12:1-3). The means of how this "great nation" will come about are not given explicitly, but later drama in the text—specifically Sarai's barrenness—reveal what could otherwise be safely assumed from the text just quoted, namely that this growth would happen procreatively. Indeed, if one accepts that—logically-speaking—the call of Abram has to chronologically exist before the sharing/canonization of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, then it is not unreasonable to read the command to fruitfulness (in Genesis 2) as a way of writing back into Israel's history this story of God's promise to Abram. This point cannot be neglected. The ethical injunctions of the creation story are not universal norms required of all people at all times and in all places, but rather is part of God's unique salvation history via the people of God who would

come to be known as Israel. Thus, those who argue for certain sex ethics based on a procreative principle should do so only if they can argue that procreation remains a part of God's means of salvation. For it is nothing less than the salvation of humankind that God speaks of in God's call of Abram, specifically the promise that through Abram "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is God's covenantal promise and one that—through the long course of time—will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But that is moving too quickly through the story.

The importance of procreation, which is presented as just being formally linked to marriage throughout the Old Testament in any instance where the preceding sexual intercourse is regarded as non-sinful, is reiterated a few chapters later by God when God says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (Genesis 17:1b-2). The significance of this passage, too often overlooked, is that Abram's exact call is not to procreative sex, but rather to "walk before" God and to "be blameless." That children will come—and enough to build a nation—is only the result of God's willingness to make Abram exceedingly numerous. The implication is that God is the only one who can bring about the salvation promised in the original covenant of chapter 12. Human participation is coincidental to it. The validity of this claim comes in two ways. First, the above quote from Genesis 17 is preceded by the following narrative description: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him" (Genesis 17:1a). The reference to Abram's age is meant to alert the reader that Abram has little role in God's plan apart from walking before God and being blameless. The actual mechanics and product of Abram's sexual congress with his wife, Sarai, only find fruitfulness in God's will. Second, and most definitively, Abram and Sarai clearly misunderstand their roles of walking before God and being blameless and presume that their sexual vigor is a

necessary ingredient in God's salvation recipe. They thusly approach the wrong task with a pragmatism that only leads them further away from walking in God's ways. Indeed, God's reaffirmation of Abram's call in Genesis 17 is the result of Abram and Sarai's pragmatic approach to creating heirs found in Genesis 16 when Sarai gives her slave-girl, Hagar, to Abram for reasons of conception. Their plan works but leads to their sorrow as Hagar begins to look with contempt upon her mistress, Sarai. Far from reading this text through the misogynistic lens of two women competing for the affections of one man, the author tells this tale as a sign that the great blessing of all families of earth promised in God's covenant with Abram clearly cannot come through Hagar's child for before the child is even born contempt was reigning.

God's patience is shown in God's reaffirmation of the Genesis 12 covenant again in Genesis 17 and God's mercy is shown in the way God expounds upon this covenant in ways clearly meant to better motivate Abram's walking before God and his blameless life. Specifically, God says, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Genesis 17:4-6). The same God who spoke creation into existence, giving day the name "day" and night the name "night," now speaks re-creation through the renaming of Abram to Abraham. God also significantly adds to the covenant not only the promise of blessings for all, but of kings from Abraham's lineage. We shall return to kings shortly, but it is also important to note that this is the passage in which God institutes the custom of male circumcision with the threat that "any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." This act of circumcision must be read symbolically. While it is clear from history that

circumcision poses no threat to procreation, the removal of a part of each man's genitalia signals that the promises of God do not come through the wholeness of man, but rather through the holiness of God. The failure to circumcise men born under this covenant requires that they be cut off from the covenant—a fate shared by eunuchs until God's further, prophetic declarations. Far from an arbitrary decree, this proclamation is a reminder of the humility required of all people if they are to walk before God and be blameless for an uncircumcised male might delude himself into thinking it is his own wholeness that will lead to the fulfillment of God's covenant, thereby reliving a version of the same hubris Abram demonstrated when he took Hagar as his mistress.

The strong connection between procreation and God's covenant of worldwide blessings makes sense of why the matriarchs of the Old Testament are so dismayed when they find themselves barren. From Sarai to Rebecca, from Hannah to Elizabeth in the New Testament, whenever a woman finds herself unable to have a child great anguish follows. Too often contemporary readers are prone to interpret this anguish through the modern lens of desiring a child for reasons of personal fulfillment. Contemporary readers no doubt join in this sorrow, but their sorrow is of a different quality from these matriarchs, for these matriarchs are not sorrowful over an incomplete personal life, but rather over the legitimate fear that God has reversed course on God's promise and that the covenant is no longer valid. Far from a personal or interpersonal crisis, infertility for women in the Bible is nothing short of a theological crisis. If they cannot conceive then God is not being true to God's promise and if God is not true to God's promise, then there is no hope for anyone. This brief excursus on infertility in the (especially) Old Testament is given as a reminder to read these stories through the prism of God's salvific plan because nothing we speak of sex and marriage can make sense otherwise. It also symbolically represents the prohibitions against same-sex intercourse because such intercourse is inherently

“barren.” This is the *why* behind the prohibition, namely, such unions cannot create children. However, the role of children—as we shall see—is also set to change in God’s salvific work in the world.

Because of God’s expanded promise to now include kings from Abraham’s line, we must investigate God’s relationship to kings. God is clearly dismayed by kings, a point no better made than in 1 Samuel 8 when the people of God begin to rally for a king in order to be “like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5b). They make this request to Samuel, who takes it to God. God’s response demonstrates the cause of God’s dismay: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). God, via Samuel, warns the people of the inevitable injustice that will arise if they get their way, but still they insist. So, God relents, granting them a king, which becomes the first step to Israel’s ultimate removal from the land that God had given them. With such a predisposition against kings, it is a wonder then that God promises them from Abraham’s lineage. Yet God’s reason for this promise in the expanded covenant of Genesis 17 will make sense in due time and it is to this that we must turn presently.

While it may seem a radical jump to move from the early chapters of Genesis to the New Testament, thereby bypassing a whole host of stories that might have import in a conversation about sex and marriage—stories such as Sodom and Gomorrah, Judah and Tamar, the aforementioned infertility narratives of Rebecca and Hannah, and so much more—God’s promise of kingly lineage for Abraham’s line necessarily pushes us forward. For the king promised to Abraham is not David nor any of his successors, but rather none other than the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. The Gospel of Matthew begins as if it is meant to prove God’s previous promise of kingly lineage, as Matthew begins with Jesus’ genealogy, stating, “An account of the

genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). The proper nouns given could not be more symbolically significant. Jesus extends from David, who is regarded by Israel as their greatest king, and David extends from Abraham, the one to whom a covenant of kingly lineage was made. It is important, however, to not read chronology as authoritative because later in his Gospel, Matthew will make it clear that Jesus is not a king after David, but rather David was a king in the form of Jesus. Matthew records the following interaction: “Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’?’ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions” (Matthew 22:41-46). The quotation Jesus provides comes from Psalm 110, a psalm of David, and is clearly meant in Matthew’s gospel to establish Jesus’ authority over David and not the opposite. This interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees is not only given to move Matthew’s plot forward—a plot that will involve the Pharisees betraying Jesus into the hands of the Roman authorities, ultimately leading to Jesus’ death—but rather as a substantiation of God’s promise of kingly lineage in God’s covenant with Abraham.

Jesus’ kingship is affirmed at nearly every turn of His life. Even at His crucifixion a would-be-but-ultimately-isn’t ironic sign reading “King of the Jews” hangs above His hanging body. The Apostle Paul, in particular, asserts time and again the kingship of Jesus, as seen in the opening chapter of Colossians when he writes about how God “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption,

the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:13-20). The original promise that through Abram’s lineage all the families of the earth would be blessed is found true in the redemption offered via the crucified King, Jesus the Christ. It is especially important to understand that this blessing really has broken beyond the boundaries of only Israel for, as Paul writes in Romans, it is now available “to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). Thus, what began as a promise of blessings for only Israel has extended itself upon “the Greek,” which symbolically represents “all the families of the earth.”

The life of Jesus can only be rightly understood in light of the promises of God to Abraham. This is, at any rate, what Matthew wants us to understand when he begins his gospel the way he does. Yet the significance of Jesus’ life and kingship for the topic of marriage and sex is not yet completed, for the very conception of Jesus is a reminder of the secondary, even tertiary, position that these things hold. Once again, Matthew’s gospel is a good guide, as shortly after the genealogy Matthew writes, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). Jesus’ conception is no act of human procreative activity, rather it comes from the Holy Spirit as an act of God’s work in the

world. Analogically related to circumcision, with its implied humility, the virgin birth of Jesus signals that salvation is the work of a faithful God and not of fertile men and women. The ensuing drama between Mary and her fiancé, Joseph, in which Joseph seeks to release Mary from their engagement quietly so as to not bring her any shame, must be read as symbolically representing humanity's own insignificance in the great drama of salvation. Joseph could not undo Mary's pregnancy, but he could distance himself from it because he feared that it was an impediment to his own attempts to act as Abram was called in walking before God and being blameless. The ironic twist here, though, is delivered by an angel of the Lord when Joseph hears, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

The Virgin Birth of Jesus signals a radical departure from the procreative norm of ancient Israel. It is enough of a departure as to risk being an entire break. What holds the old covenant, represented by the loss of flesh through circumcision, together with the new covenant, represented by the taking on of flesh in the incarnation, is the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. "Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33). Ancestor by genealogy and chronology, but predecessor by theology, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. In a surprising twist, the people of God who were to grow larger and larger, filling the earth and subduing it, cannot together accomplish what God accomplishes through this one man, Jesus the Christ. All of the procreative labor, all of the resulting tribes,

nations, kings, legal codes and structures, religious rites, festivals, and sacrifices, all of Israel's history was awaiting this one moment. It is not a moment of procreative boom, with so many Israelites that their numbers overrun the earth, nor with vigorous birthing (cf. Exodus 1:19), but rather with one significant birth that God completes God's task of bringing all the families of the earth into God's family. The significance of this entrance, though, remains to be seen, even as Jesus tries to give voice to it in a conversation that John records between Himself and Nicodemus in John 3: "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'" (John 3:3-6).

Jesus' rejection of the flesh becomes a flashpoint for the anti-corporeal philosophy of the Gnostics in the time shortly after Jesus of Nazareth's life, death, and resurrection and remains a flashpoint for today's more hedonistic culture that accuses the church of being anti-sex, anti-body, or in failing to be sex-positive in its teaching. That Paul expounds further upon the distinction between flesh and spirit only exacerbates the misunderstandings. However, it should be clear by now that the God who would deign to become incarnate out of God's love for the corporeal world cannot be wholly anti-body. Instead, this rejection of the "flesh" is a rejection of the presumed trajectory of the Abrahamic covenant. The prevailing assumption was that Jewish procreation and stewardship of the world, done in righteousness through compliance to the Law and under the loving-kindness of their God, would usher in God's Kingdom. The apostles, the leaders of the early church, recognize the failures of this program. They label the entire

presumption around the Abrahamic covenant “flesh” and proceed to detail a new ethic rooted in the Spirit. Thus, passages like, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11), become a shorthand for accepting the new covenant, announced to Mary, incarnate in Christ, assured by His resurrection, and sustained by the sending of the Holy Spirit. In a similar manner, Paul utilizes the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles to symbolize the content of the old covenant, thereby leading him to write passages like, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). The point is not that Gentiles remain outside of the covenant, but that those who would see God’s will done through *their* flesh and not the flesh that God takes on in Jesus, will be left with only their flesh to trust. Again and again, the new covenant does not reject flesh *qua* flesh, but rather flesh *qua* covenant. This insight becomes the interpretive key for understanding the harsher bits of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:27-32). In these instances,

“flesh” is symbolic of the old covenant, and so, if the old covenant holds one back from the new, then it is best to cut it off.

Jesus’ reference to divorce signals another way in which God’s new covenant is to be understood. To be sure, understanding the relationship between God and God’s people as a relationship between a husband and wife is not unique to the new covenant. Most poignantly, the prophet Hosea is instructed to “take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hosea 1:2). Though this command begins as a negative metaphor, in which God is the faithful-but-still-jilted lover, the reaffirmation of God’s love for God’s people is found a little later on when God says, “I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. 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 2:14-20). The prophet intentionally uses language of both the creation (e.g., “the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground”; cf. Genesis 1:26) and of the eschaton, the coming age of God’s unfettered rule over the world (e.g., “I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land”; cf. Isaiah 2:4, Revelation 21:4). In doing so, he draws the beginning and ending of the canon together,

recasting the people of God in matrimonial imagery and awaiting the day when they see “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). Yet lest Hosea be accused of a realized eschatology, after the condemnation of chapter one and the restoration of chapter two comes the pronouncement of an as-yet consummation in chapter three when Hosea writes, “The Lord said to me again, ‘Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.’ So, I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. And I said to her, ‘You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you.’ For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days” (Hosea 3:1-5). The “latter days” are found in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Therefore, the entire life of Christ can be understood in matrimonial terms with His sacrifice being the dowry and His ascension being the last wilderness the people of God must walk before entering the final and ultimate Promised Land. As Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Understanding the entirety of salvation history through the lens of matrimony does not leave the latter unaltered. Whereas the old covenant saw marriage as the means to procreative ends and procreation as the means to eschatological ends, the new covenant puts this flesh to

death and thereby opens new pathways to the eschaton. Our social-historical-religious understanding of marriage's place, therefore, is decentralized as the matrimonial union of Jesus and the Church is centered. As a result, the early church is less interested in our traditional understanding of marriage. As was noted above, Jesus already radicalizes the role of eunuchs by recasting at least some of them as eunuchs for the kingdom. Under a paradigm in which procreation is essential to the kingdom, this is impossible. Yet there are other places where He signals the end to the old paradigm. For example, Matthew records a conversation between Jesus and the Sadducees in which they challenge Jesus on a broken theological premise, specifically that there is no resurrection of the dead. While dismissing their apostasy, Jesus does further signal the decentralized place of marriage in the new covenant when He says, "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:30). It is easy to misread this reference to "like angels" and assume the non-corporeality of the kingdom to come, but such a reading is more Gnostic than Christian. Instead, the people of God will be like angels because their union with God will not be founded upon the potency of their procreation, but rather on their fealty to God and God's faithfulness to them.

Though marriage is decentered in the story of salvation, it is not discarded entirely. The Apostle Paul gives the longest treatment on the subject when addressing the church in Corinth in his first letter to them. In the seventh chapter, Paul responds to their prompt—"It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1), which is most certainly as un-sex-positive a statement as one can get—by responding "because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority

over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Corinthians 7:2-4). Paul’s position is more concession than command, as he makes clear shortly thereafter when he writes, “This I say by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:6-9). Again, one must understand “passion” as problematic only in its unique relationship to God’s procreative plan in the old covenant. Passion, in and of itself, is not sinful, but trusting in the former ways is. Thus, Paul’s advice is a radical departure from the old paradigm—to say nothing of contemporary Christian literature that speaks of marriage as a “gift”—because Paul presents singleness as the true gift. He explains later that “those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:31b-35).

Once marriage is decentered, we find all aspects of domestic life decentered with it. Indeed, passages from the New Testament that have been haphazardly handled often seek to undo the very hope found in the new covenant by interpreting the moral guidance of the early church through distinctly Jewish lenses. There may be no better instance of this sort of

misreading around marriage than can be found in Ephesians 5, where Paul writes, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. 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 5:21-33). Early in the passage, the reader is clued to the fact that it is less husbands and wives being discussed and more Jesus and the Church. The temptation is to read the eschaton as a metaphor for marriage, whereas the reality is that marriage—if it is to be considered at all and only as a concession then—is best performed as a metaphor for the eschaton. Of course, as Jesus made clear, there is no marriage in the eschaton, so there is no reason to believe that what is performed here in marriage has any eternal consequence, but rather because eternity has been secured, marriage can take a different flavor by pointing to the salvation of “all the families of the earth” in Jesus Christ. Yet what might be easily missed in the opening verses cannot be denied by the end. Paul quotes Genesis, which we will remember was written to retroactively bolster the procreative premise of the

Abrahamic covenant, but then declares it “a great mystery.” He does not, of course, mean the old paradigm, but rather “Christ and the church.” So all-encompassing is the power of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that even well-known, well-worn passages about holy matrimony can no longer be read as if they were ever meant to refer to what a man and woman does but must be understood most properly as a testimony to the incarnation. Jesus “leaves” the Father and becomes “one flesh” with His creation, humanity, thereby securing without procreation that which could have never been secured through it. It cannot be understated how thoroughgoing of a biblical interpretation this is. Just as the power of the Abrahamic covenant could be inscribed back into the very foundations of creation, so Paul now understands the incarnation of Jesus as being inscribed back into the creation accounts. He thinks and writes as only a Jewish convert to following Jesus could, that is to say, he does not flinch to recast and reinscribe creation in light of covenant.

The challenge, then, that remains is to understand how this covenant is to grow—that is, how Jesus will actually bless all the families of the earth—if this isn’t to happen through procreation. To be sure, many Christians miss this point and believe that the Christian church is to grow by the same procreative means that Israel was meant to grow, but now with the added advantage of the atoning death of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit poured out on God’s people. Chief amongst these misguided Christians are the Roman Catholic Church and the branch of conservative Christian evangelicalism that goes by the name “Quiver Full Christians” (or QF Christians, for short). Because the Roman Catholic position is more nuanced and because it leaves ample room for celibacy as a form of faithfulness, QF Christianity is a better interlocutor. These Christians derive their name and ethics from Psalm 127: “Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are

the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate" (Psalm 127:3-5). Proving that a little scripture in the wrong hands is a dangerous thing indeed, the undoing of this quiver full position is found in the opening verses of that same psalm, which read: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil" (Psalm 127:1-2). The procreative paradigm of the Abrahamic covenant can be understood as—forgiving the pun—those who "labor in vain." Forty-two generations of faithful Israelites could not accomplish what God did in God's incarnation in Jesus. Furthermore, for any couple who has ever sought fertility treatment for the sake of securing an heir, the idea of rising early, going to bed late, and generally "eating the bread of anxious toil" will resonate all too well with them. Such stories help recast the import of procreation under the new covenant established in Jesus Christ.

So, if the covenant is not to grow through the faithful procreation of children to faithful parents, other alternatives must be sought. One alternative is most profoundly presented by Paul, who explains to the church in Rome that they—and especially the Gentile believers amongst them—are children of God not through heredity, but adoption. As he writes, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:15-17). In a similar way, Paul also writes to the church in Galatia, "My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under

guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" (Galatians 4:1-7). In both of these passages, Paul deconstructs the old paradigm and then reinscribes it through a Christological lens. The simplest point is that the old covenant was confirmed in conception, but the new covenant is confirmed in conversion. Thus, the Church is to grow, not by the conjugal potency of its members for all are not called to marriage and all who do marry are not called to raising their own children, but rather the Church grows with each new convert. This conversion occurs only through adoption into the family of God, an adoption that Paul also describes as a wild vine being unnaturally grafted into the domestic vine (cf. Romans 11:17ff.). This metaphor only holds together, of course, in Jesus, who declares, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower" (John 15:1). Indeed, there is no hope for the Ethiopian eunuch if it is impossible for wild vines to be grafted into the vine and held there by the True Vine.

As a result of adoption replacing procreation, otherwise innocuous stories from the life of Jesus begin to make sense. Take, for instance, His words to His mother while hanging from the cross. The Gospel of John records the following: "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (John 19:26-27). What might be recast in sentimental terms can now be understood in adoptive terms. The traditional family unit, far from being the cornerstone of faithful life, is

expanded in ways that allow a real family to grow in the place where once only fertile seeds germinated into a biological heir. After all that's written above, it is not surprising to find that terms like "husband," "wife," "mother," and "brother" must now be interpreted beyond the scope of procreation and through the lens of redemptive adoption. Contrary the historical-critical scholars who read this passage as Jesus' accommodating a son-less widow in a society that would undoubtedly be cruel to her and thereby reading this passage as an illustration of charity and mercy, we can now understand that even from His cross, Jesus continues to prophetically proclaim a new aeon for sex, marriage, and the family. That the contemporary church in America fails to trust in this new vision is as much a symptom of a greater misunderstanding of the relationship between the old and new covenants as it is a trust in heredity and genetics as the keys to ordering society. Attempts, then, to infiltrate these societal norms and attempt to subvert them to Christian ends falls flat. The only alternative is to truly seek the blessing of all the families of the earth through the new, surprising, and non-procreative means offered through the Church.

In relation, then, to this chapter's central theme, same-sex marriage must be understood not in terms of its inability to procreatively produce children, but in terms of its ability to engage and represent God's covenant-making with God's creation. That is to say, as gay Christian marriages make and sustain a monogamous, lifelong covenant, they symbolically witness to God's monogamous, eternal covenant founded in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Once procreation is decentered, prohibitions on same-sex marriage are left without their last moral and scriptural justification. Now such marriages must be read in the exact same light at opposite-sex marriages, which is to say that they exist as a concession to the main task of walking a blameless, holy life. Indeed, given the Church's complicity in asserting procreation

over covenant, gay marriages actually stand to *better* witness to the purpose of marriage under the new covenant created in Jesus Christ. They are inherently unprocreative, but blessed all the same, which means that it is more difficult to misunderstand their purpose of witnessing to faithfulness than it is to espy this purpose in straight marriages, which may get plagued by old, procreative presumptions. Gay marriage, then, might just save marriage in the Church. Such a statement can only make sense when the topic is framed by a call to unity, as outlined at the beginning of this section. By decentering gay marriage as a central issue in the Church—and replacing that with a politics of witness and unity in the Eucharist, per Hauerwas—gay marriage can receive the “first sense” theology it so desperately needs, which will then permeate second and third senses of the Church.

Yet all this is but the narrative that makes marriage, gay and straight alike, intelligible for the Church. Focus on the sort of community and character necessary for gay marriage is required if this is to be a truly Hauerwasian theology of inclusion. To these foci, then, we must now turn our pursuit.

A PASTORAL THEOLOGY FOR SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Having supplied a thick enough narrative for the inclusion of same-sex marriage above, it is equally important to present the necessary community and character essential to make same-sex marriage intelligible in the Church. This appeal to community and character finds unified articulation under the umbrella of “pastoral theology,” by which I mean the theologically enriched practical guidance for how both individuals (character) and the Church (community) can and should embody an inclusive posture toward same-sex marriage. The key for claiming same-sex marriage in the church is sanctification. Eugene Rogers previously raised this theme (see: *Inclusion by Way of Theology* in chapter three) and so to Rogers we turn again, seeking to

clarify and substantiate his position, as well as demonstrate the ways in which it pairs nicely with Hauerwas' approach.

Rogers' argument runs thusly⁵⁵⁰: Marriage, as a form of asceticism, is a spiritual discipline through which we are sanctified. Specifically, this sanctification takes the form of living in a close enough—and therefore dangerous enough—community so as to have our worst selves revealed, and then healed. We do this in community as a form of preparation for (eschatological) life in the Triune God, who is also community. As he writes, “To reflect trinitarian holiness, sanctification must involve community. It involves commitments to a community from which one can't easily escape, whether monastic, nuptial or congregational.”⁵⁵¹ Key to community is the diversity we find there. Rogers makes his case for diversity in a quasi-natural theology manner by appealing to God's creation, though he does assert that the diversity we find—this claim that the creation is diverse is all but taken for granted—is the work of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵² Diversity comes back around to sanctification as sanctification requires a community made up of “the right sort of people,”⁵⁵³ which he then explains and expands upon, writing, “The right sort of people are those who will succeed in exposing and healing one another's flaws. For gay and lesbian people, the right sort of otherness is unlikely to be represented by someone of the opposite sex, because only someone of the apposite, not opposite, sex will get deep enough into the relationship to expose one's vulnerabilities and inspire the trust

⁵⁵⁰ A similar form of this argument can be found in the co-authored essay by Rogers, Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, and Cynthia B. Kittredge, in which they begin their piece by writing, “Marriage is a discipline. Marriage is a means of grace. Marriage is a discipline and a means of grace for sinners. Marriage is a discipline and a means of grace for sinners and for the whole church.” (Deirdre Joy Good, Willis Jenkins, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. “A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals.” *Anglican Theological Review* 93 [no 1 Winter 2011]: 51-87), 51.

⁵⁵¹ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “Sanctified Unions: An Argument for Gay Marriage,” *The Christian Century* 121, no. 12 (June 15, 2004), 28.

⁵⁵² Cf. *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28.

that healing requires.”⁵⁵⁴ Rogers is informed in this assessment by David McCarthy, whom he quotes as defining “homosexual orientation”⁵⁵⁵ as ““Gay men and lesbians are person who encounter the other (and thus themselves) in relation to persons of the same sex.””⁵⁵⁶ He then concludes, “Some people, therefore, are called to same-sex partnerships for their own sanctification. Opposite-sex partnerships wouldn’t work for them, because those would evade rather than establish the right kind of transformative vulnerability.”⁵⁵⁷

Rogers finds deep sympathies with Hauerwas’ position (indeed, he cites him in one essay) to the degree that he does not speak of marriage *qua* marriage or sex *qua* sex. Instead, he presents marriage as a practice of the Church (and routinely pairs marriage with monasticism in the process) with an aim toward the growth in character for each married person⁵⁵⁸. As he writes elsewhere, “Marriage makes a school for virtue, where God prepares the couple for life with himself by binding them for life to each other. Marriage, in this view, is for sanctification.”⁵⁵⁹ Where Rogers is not as clear is precisely *why* the opposite relationship of same-sex couples is necessary for their sanctification—that is, he lacks a description (not a definition) of sexual desire, in whatever orientation, and its link to the vulnerability necessary for marriage to be a school of virtue in which our hurts and brokenness are brought to the surface for the sake of healing. However, where Rogers fails to make such an accounting, Rowan Williams, Hauerwas’ friend, steps in nicely—and in a book edited by Rogers, nonetheless.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵⁸ Cf. Good, et al. “A Theology of Marriage including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals,” 52.

⁵⁵⁹ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “Same-Sex Complementarity: A Theology of Marriage,” *The Christian Century* 128, no. 10 (May 17, 2011), 27.

⁵⁶⁰ See: Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).

In the essay, “The Body’s Grace,”⁵⁶¹ Williams sets out to describe (sexual) desire in such a manner that its relevance to Christian discipleship is in a way that it is more than “a marginal eccentricity in the doctrinal spectrum.”⁵⁶² As Williams presents it, borrowing from Thomas Nagel’s philosophical accounting of sexual desire, both desiring and being desired (acts which are interrelated, as we shall soon see) is a form of “the body’s grace,” wherein “Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.”⁵⁶³ Learning that we are seen as significant, as wanted by God often requires a corporeal experience of the same with other people. Before proceeding any further, it is worth noting that Williams does not limit the manner in which we are seen as significant, as wanted to mere erotic desire. There are a multitude of other, equally corporeal ways in which this happens. However, the erotic/sexual is the manner that is most relevant to a discussion on same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church (and, for that matter, as justification or rationale for opposite-sex marriage inclusion in the Church).

Williams performs Nagel’s philosophy of sexual desire, which requires mutual desire in a complex system of mutual perceptions, in the following way:

Initially I may be aroused by someone unaware of being perceived by me, and that arousal is significant in ‘identifying me with my body’ in a new way but is not yet sufficient for speaking about the full range of sexuality. I am aroused as a cultural, not just a biological being; I need, that is, to bring my body into the shared world of languages and (in the widest sense!) ‘intercourse.’ My arousal is not only my business: I need its cause to know about it, to recognize it, for it to be anything more than a passing chance. So, my desire, if it is going to be sustained and developed, must itself be perceived; and, if it is to develop as it naturally tends to, it must be perceived as desirable by the other—that is, my arousal and desire must become the cause of someone else’s desire.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶¹ Rowan D. Williams, “The Body’s Grace” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 309-321.

⁵⁶² Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” 320.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 312.

Desire, as Williams presents it, is a communal activity. It cannot be done alone—or, at least, cannot reach the fullness of itself without the participation of another. As grace is linked, then, with being wanted, so it is linked with the necessary community in which desire can take place.

Of course, for one's desire to flourish means we must be made vulnerable in admitting our desire for another in the hope/chance that they, too, shall desire us. That such is the case means that "nothing will stop sex being tragic and comic. It is above all the area of our lives where we can be rejected in our bodily entirety."⁵⁶⁵ This always-waiting tragedy, this ever-present potential for rejection is precisely what creates the necessary vulnerability, per Rogers' above point, for our brokenness to be revealed and healed. Additionally, we should note that the manner in which Williams presents desire completely deconstructs the private/public binary of Modern liberalism, a binary that Hauerwas routinely calls into question. Here, then, we find a thick description of (sexual) desire capable of providing a narrative that informs particular practices and aims at a particular character. That it is inherently communal is also not surprising given the ways we have learned from Hauerwas that narrative, character, and community are all interrelated.

Thus far, however, Williams can be accused of perpetuating desire *qua* desire in a manner that is distinctly *not* Hauerwasian. However, he avoids this pitfall by asserting that "I simply don't think we would grasp all that was involved in the mutual transformation of sexually linked persons without the reality of unconditional public commitments."⁵⁶⁶ Unconditional public commitments are necessary because "sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 314.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 315.

away from the perception of another.”⁵⁶⁷ This is also the moment where desire finds its liturgical home in the practices of the Church, specifically the nuptial vows between partners. The alternative to unconditional public commitments is sexual perversion, in which perversion is defined as “sexual activity without risk, without the dangerous acknowledgement that my joy depends on someone else’s, as theirs does on mine. Distorted sexuality is the effort to bring my happiness back under my control and to refuse to let my body be recreated by another person’s perception.”⁵⁶⁸ Hauerwas calls marriage an “adventure” precisely because it is an inherently out of control institution—that is, marriage does not so much regulate the time and place of sexual activity, but rather our attempts to gain and regain control over our own lives. This also pairs well with Hauerwas’ routine return to life in all its contingencies, for desire/marriage so understood does not seek to flee from contingencies, but rather to find the body’s grace precisely in submitting to these contingencies.

It is also worth noting that desire-without-risk is apt to permit unchecked privilege, and thus injustice, to reign. For example, men experience a privileged position in western societies and are, therefore, much more capable of pursuing desire without any risk. They are permitted this privilege not because they are inherently less emotional, but because social narratives that are easily summarized as “boys will be boys” makes their desire-without-risk intelligible. In such a misogynistic system, women are *not* afforded this same privilege. The social, sexual scripts create an expectation that they will be made vulnerable in their sexual desires in a way that men are not. All this to say, Williams’ point about the necessity of unconditional public commitment is made not as a deontological mandate pressed down upon the Church, but rather as an enactment of a mutually shared narrative that will make desire-as-vulnerability intelligible for

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 315.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 314.

both men and women. To the degree that each, then, trust more and more in the narrative of their own commitment, they reject the cultural narratives or sexual scripts at work in the world.

Yet how does this pertain to the Church's blessing of same-sex marriages? It is precisely in coming to accept that "the moral question... ought to be: How much do we want our sexual activity to communicate? How much do we want it to display the breadth of human possibility and a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of others?"⁵⁶⁹ To speak of our sexual activity as communicating something is but another way of speaking of how our sexual activity (and/or marriages) are made intelligible, to put it in Hauerwasian terms. As Rogers continues, "Decisions about sexual lifestyle, the ability to identify certain patterns as sterile, undeveloped, or even corrupt, are, in this light, decisions about what we want our bodily life to say, how our bodies are to be brought into the whole project of 'making human sense' for ourselves and each other."⁵⁷⁰ When Hauerwas presents marriage (and singleness) by noting its symbolic force as a witness to the new Kingdom God has instituted in Jesus Christ—when children become beacons of hope, not that our hope is in them but that our hope in God is proven in our willingness to have children in this world; that is, to trust that the world is not God-forsaken—he is writing in terms of "making human sense," albeit more theologically than Williams is here. Of course, Williams is a fine enough theologian to get there too: "the body's grace itself only makes human sense if we have a language of grace in the first place; this in turn depends on having a language of creation and redemption."⁵⁷¹ To have such language is to have a thick narrative that is sustained by an interpretive community called the Church. To find that desire and grace is linked does not occur because desire reveals grace, but because grace reveals

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 313.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 313-314.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 317.

the purpose of desire. In a startling twist, heterosexual desire is not the only means by which grace is manifested for “the community needs some who... put their identities directly into the hands of God in the single life.”⁵⁷² The single life is just one of the ways that desire is not solely or uniformly heteronormative for the single person (whatever their internal disposition of desire is, which does not matter since it does not seek its fulfillment by being recognized by the one desired) learns to find their desirability in God and God alone. In a similar, though tangentially-related manner then, same-sex attraction also presses against heteronormative assumptions as it “annoyingly poses the question of what the meaning of desire is—in itself, not considered as instrumental to some other process, such as the peopling of the world [as with the offspring produced in opposite-sex marriages].”⁵⁷³ The manner in which Williams links the body’s grace, which itself is only intelligible within the narrative of God’s creation and redemption of bodies, with the non-procreative lives of gay people *may* be enough to challenge Hauerwas’ presumption to the openness to children for the validation of a marriage. To be sure, what Hauerwas has said about the symbolic value of children can and does still hold true, though by pairing it with Williams’ understanding of the grace-revealed purpose of desire (which occurs in all people and not just those with children), space is created for the inclusion of same-sex marriage in the Church. At the very least, many of Hauerwas’ concerns—treating sexuality *qua* sexuality as a thing; rooting practices in narratively-informed disciplines of the Church; the formation of Christian character—have all been satisfied as “first sense” means of discussing same-sex marriage in Williams’ and Rogers’ combined reflections. Additionally, that Hauerwas already understands that some couples in the Church will be childless (a theme we will return to more

⁵⁷² Ibid., 317.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 318.

thoroughly in chapter five) and can accept their marriages as valid anyway means that a firm enough Hauerwasian foundation has been established for same-sex marriage.

CONCLUSION

As should be expected, to address same-sex marriage in the Church in a Hauerwasian manner means understanding the narrative, community, and character necessary for such inclusion. As has been demonstrated, the biblical narrative—especially when read in a symbolic world mode of appeal, since marriage is primarily understood symbolically (especially in the New Testament)—provides sufficient grounds for this inclusion. However, contrary many Progressives who attempt this narrative pursuit via a historical-critical apologetic of certain “fragments” of scripture, the narrative must be a *metanarrative*, not in a totalizing claim to the certainty of what the scripture says, but as an interpretive practice of the community. To speak of the community for this topic is to first address the Triune God, in whom life both originates and is destined, then the community of the Church, and finally—pertinent specifically to this chapter—the community of the married couple, whether gay or straight. Working backwards, then, we find that gay marriage is a “school of virtue” for a gay Christian couple that necessarily requires the witness of the commitment made by the Church as a community (and as this commitment is made under the Church’s liturgy), all of which is preparation to be received by God, the true “Other” through grace in Jesus Christ. Rooted in such a community, a gay Christian couple will make themselves vulnerable to the tragedies (and comedies) of sex so that which is most broken, most rejected can be made visible—and then healed. This process of revealing/healing is sanctification, through which their character in Christ grows in greater holiness. That gay Christians needs this process of sanctification as much as straight couples is not disputed (indeed, Traditionalists may claim they need it even more) and therefore access to

the means by which this sanctification can occur ought not be an opportunity granted by something as precarious as a “local option” in each parish, but rather ought to be permitted and blessed by the whole Church, in all places. Such a claim is not made on the grounds of it being “just,” for the principle of justice is just too thin to serve either the Church or gay couples. And yet, maybe by grace, we may find that same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church witnesses to God’s justice all the same, especially as the gay Christian couple grows in their sanctification through their marriage for the sake of blessing the whole world. That is to say, appeals to justice in the gay marriage debate are best made by asking how gay Christians might just be formed by the Church and the Church’s practice of marriage so that they can become agents of this justice more than recipients of it. In focusing back on gay Christians’ vocation to justice, we avoid linking their agency to their victimhood, but rather to their status as desired, wanted by God.

Finally, Hauerwas’ greatest challenge to the inclusion of same-sex marriage in the church—namely, the openness to receiving children—is challenged on all fronts. Narratively, gay marriage’s inherent “barrenness” is actually a practical way to save straight marriage from falling back into procreative presumptions. That is to say, for straight marriages to remember that they are witnesses to a covenanting God and not their own fecundity, they need gay marriage to hold an inherently un-fecund place. For, ultimately, the reception of children is not a task reserved only or exclusively for marriage, but for the whole church—young and old, fertile and infertile, single and married. Similarly, per Williams, gay marriages present the role of desire—namely, as the community in which tragedy is possible and thus vulnerability is inherent—as a place for the body’s grace; and, again, does so heuristically over and against straight marriages which may seek to find its grace in its children, not in God’s covenant. In all instances, then—in narrative, community, and character—gay marriage not only has a place within the Church, but

(at least at this moment of transition) can serve to better call straight marriages back to their point and purpose. In due time, of course, it is hoped that same-sex marriage becomes so included in the Church's overall witness that we need not speak of "gay" and "straight" marriages but can return to understanding the important place of marriage, in general, in the Church. Presently, however, it is bold enough to claim that not only are same-sex marriages a moral imperative for the Church, but also a means through which the Church will be blessed and enhanced in its witness to the world.

Chapter Five

Cohabitation: An Opportunity for Liturgical Retrieval

INTRODUCTION

One of Hauerwas' key assertions is that "married" and "single" are not sociological or even relational realities so much as they name offices of the Church. As offices, they carry with them implicit practices, born of the Church's politic, and when practiced in this intentional manner witness to the Kingdom of God in our midst. Or, maybe put in a more Hauerwasian manner, the practices implied by "married" and "single" in the Church are only intelligible if Jesus Christ is who He says He is. Marriage and singleness so understood embody the contrastive model of the Church—and contrast it does, for the cultural view of singleness is often but another name for loneliness. As for marriage, culturally understood, it suffers under the twin oppressors of romanticism and realism—each of which brings its own unique anxiety. The romantic account of marriage lures individuals to trust in their sense of love for their partner, though no one is quite sure how to define this love and how much of it is necessary to sustain a marriage. This is when the realist account of marriage enters and reminds individuals of the failure rate of marriages. It is no wonder, then, that the topic of this chapter—cohabitation—becomes such an alluring option, for cohabitation seeks to trust in love without having to make the tenuous commitment of marriage.

Cohabitation, of course, is not only a cultural phenomenon, but an ecclesial reality too. Most pastors marry couples who are already living together and, almost certainly, have already slept together. This is largely a result of the Christian account of marriage being unduly influenced by the cultural accounts of romanticism and realism; and of the Church failing to acknowledge the office of single at all as a valid means of pursuing one's discipleship. For

Hauerwas, “cohabitation” does not name an office or practice of the Church, but it is still routinely practiced in the Church.

Cohabitation goes unaddressed in any of Hauerwas’ writings on marriage, sex, and the family. He is not unaware of its existence, so much as trying to make a positive enough appraisal of the Church’s actual practices as to draw Christians to these. Yet any number of practitioners will acknowledge that cohabitation is fairly deeply entrenched in the Church at this point and, therefore, an attractational model is an imprudent course of action. The challenge, therefore, is to plumb Hauerwas’ general approach to marriage, sex, and the family to see if it can speak anything other than condemnation on the cohabitating praxis of so many Christians.

In order to analyze cohabitation in a Hauerwasian manner, however, we need a thick description of precisely what cohabitation is, what its motives are, and what its documented outcomes have been and continue to be. That is to say, we need a thick description of cohabitation if it is to be more than a strawman. This dive into the cohabitating practices of individuals will also involve a review of the practices of their sex lives together, for if Hauerwas has taught us anything it is that sex is never just sex. It is only made intelligible by a foundational narrative that gives the act meaning. As such, a review of the current sex scripts and sexual economics is necessary to better understand how sex has meaning in contemporary culture.

To pursue this course of inquiry will, however, require us to make a distinctly anti-Hauerwasian move in reviewing social scientific studies and data. It should be understood, though, that Hauerwas’ resistance to the social sciences is a result of the ways in which they often—even if not intentionally—create an “ought” out of an “is”—that is to say that describing normal practices becomes a way of normalizing those practices. This is a valid concern and one that will be carried through any and all cautious readings of social scientific research. Yet the

fact remains that though cohabitation has been steadily on the rise for well over 40 years, it has gone largely unnoted in theological circles. What notations do exist are—as we will soon see—largely of the handwringing and/or scolding variety.

Ultimately, cohabitation as it is presently understood and practiced will not find good standing in a Hauerwasian approach to marriage and sex. However, an option still exists to retrieve betrothal as an office and practice of the Church. Whether this retrieval will satisfy Hauerwas' understanding of marriage and family will remain to be seen. And so, the structure of this chapter is as follows: a review of the Christian concerns around cohabitation will validate the necessity of addressing this topic. This will necessarily lead to a review of the sexual habits of young people, which is pursued so as to better understand the sex scripts and sexual economics at work in contemporary society. Only then can cohabitation as a practice be addressed, though we will find that often cohabitation is more predicated upon socio-economic standards than mass moral failure by an increasing number of young people. From here, we can seek what it would mean to retrieve betrothal as an office and practice of the Church and whether it can be presented to the Church as a way in which to live out its contrastive mandate for the sake of witnessing to the world. Finally, the conclusion will review all of the above and speculate as to whether or not it would pass muster with the theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas.

A final note in this introduction is necessary. Cohabitation is largely seen as the exploits of the young. And this is true, but only to a point. Much cohabitation research ignores post-divorce cohabitation of the middle aged and, especially, the post-widowhood cohabitation of the elderly, though both of these phenomena still occur both within and beyond the Church. As such, the majority of attention will—because of the leading of the studies used—focus on young people, but the insights and conclusions are not unique or exclusive to one generation.

CHRISTIAN CONCERNS ABOUT COHABITATION

The dis-ease with cohabitation is a unifying feature, even amongst churches and Christian leaders who might otherwise be diametrically opposed on other issues, like same-sex marriage. To be sure, there is still a spectrum, but it is a spectrum that begins with a heavy emphasis on the marital norm of the Church. Thus, even the most Progressive regard cohabitation more as a matter of fact than the practice of an ideal. A *Christianity Today* article from 2011 represents the spectrum well. On the most permissive side, one encounters perspectives like those articulated by Kurt Frederickson, Associate Dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, who says, “I will most likely officiate a wedding for a couple who has been living together. The arms of the church need to be open, giving them opportunity to know the grace of Christ and hopefully become part of the congregation.”⁵⁷⁴ Referring to “grace” for these couples seemingly implies that lack of grace present in their current living arrangement. Additionally, the “most likely” is language that hedges away from full acceptance or embrace. And, again, this is the more permissive side. The other end of the spectrum is articulated well by the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., who writes, “Pastors are stewards of a biblical understanding of sexuality. Marrying cohabiters miscommunicates the teaching function of marriage. I would only marry Christian couples that were repentant, had forsaken the sin of cohabiting, and sought the remedy of marriage.”⁵⁷⁵ Mohler presents cohabitation as a clear sin and one for which mere internal acknowledgement is not enough for full reconciliation with/in the church; such couples need to also cease the cohabiting practice. Of course, seeking lived repentance (and not just some emotional, internal version) is common enough in the church, but

⁵⁷⁴ Ruth Moon (Complier), “Should Pastors Perform Marriages for Cohabiting Couples?” *Christianity Today* 55, no. 10 (10 October 2011), 18.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

its employment on this topic elevates the practice to something like fraud, gossip, substance abuse, and the like. In both instances, though, there are clear misgivings with the practice.

Misgivings are not the only place of similarity amongst otherwise disparate parties. Most Christian leaders also acknowledge cohabitation's prevalence and seeming permanence in our culture, at least in this moment of time. Demographic accounting is part of nearly every essay, article, or book on the subject. Sara Wenger Shenk provides a precise enough representation of this trend when she writes, "The 2005 U.S. census reported that 4.85 million couples were cohabiting, up more than 1,000 percent from 1960, when there were 439,000 such couples."⁵⁷⁶ Shenk, who claims her appreciation of metaphors early in her essay,⁵⁷⁷ likens the increase to a rising flood, albeit one that—unlike actually flooding—no one necessarily saw coming. There is a tangible feeling amongst most commentators of having been caught flat-footed in regard to cohabitation; a feeling only exacerbated by reference to the own matriculation into adult living together. Irma Fast Dueck is a good example of this when she begins her essay by recounting the "predictable and familiar"⁵⁷⁸ manner in which she and her husband courted 32 years prior (in 1984). While thorough demographic research clearly demonstrates a multi-generational trend toward cohabitation, the sense that one generation did courtship a certain way and another generation did it quite differently is common.

Commentators maintain their unity is their rationale for rejecting (or, at least, significantly questioning) cohabitation, which is not as theological as one might assume amongst church leaders but is rooted much more in social scientific research. Cohabitation, it is claimed, actually *erodes* the trust necessary for a healthy marriage, rather than rehearsing it prior to the

⁵⁷⁶ Sara Wenger Shenk, "Cohabitation: What Is at Stake?," *Vision* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 25.

⁵⁷⁷ Cf., *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁷⁸ Irma Fast Dueck, "Without Rings or Strings: Engaging Cohabitation in the Church," *Direction* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2016), 181.

marriage. Horror stories are quickly trotted out, as when Shenk writes, “Cohabiting couples report higher levels of conflict, domestic violence, abuse, and infidelity than married partners do. More than a third of cohabiting couples share their homes with children under fifteen, and compared to a parent, a live-in partner is far more likely to abuse children living in the household.”⁵⁷⁹ Of course, this may be little more than a scare tactic since all these ills *do* still occur in marriages (albeit, apparently, at lower rates of incidence)—and are maybe all the more traumatic when, for example, infidelity occurs *within* the covenant of marriage. That is to say, the social scientific research does not (and likely cannot) evaluate the level of trauma resulting from these ills for cohabiters versus marrieds.

More nuanced commentators also take the time to note that not all cohabitation is equal. Dueck explains the four different types—casual, cautious, committed, and alternative⁵⁸⁰—while Shenk employs five categories—casual, committed, trial, delayed, and alternative.⁵⁸¹ Often unspoken in these categories, and in discussions about cohabitation in general, is the presumption that we are addressing young or emerging adults; those somewhere between 18 and 35 years old. Of course, much cohabitation takes place amongst post-divorce couples who, having been harmed in their previous marriages, distrust the institution and seek to construct a relationship dynamic unique to them. Also, elderly adults, for whom remarriage may constitute a whole host of economic troubles (e.g., losing a deceased spouse’s pension/social security benefits, inheritance concerns, etc.), are routinely neglected in conversations about cohabitation.⁵⁸² Indeed, an interesting question arises concerning the elderly who permanently

⁵⁷⁹ Shenk, 28-29.

⁵⁸⁰ Dueck, 181-182.

⁵⁸¹ Shenk, 28.

⁵⁸² For more on the elderly, which cannot be addressed here, see: James M. Childs, Jr., “Aging and Sexuality,” *Dialog* 58, no. 4 (Dec 2019), 269-276.

reside in assisted living/nursing homes and whether any relationship struck up amongst co-residence would constitute “cohabitation”? Would such a couple need to be sleeping together at night for it to be cohabitation? What if these care facilities forbid this practice (so as to better track where each resident is for the sake of their care)? Would it even matter if, in the course of their lonely and empty afternoon hours they had all the time necessary for sexual congress and could, thus, enjoy the comforts of a solitary bed to themselves at night? Those addressing cohabitation rarely focus on such stories, though surely, they do exist both in the Church and beyond it.

With a primary focus on the young, most authors also try to explore or explain *why* cohabitation has risen in popularity. Many factors are explored, including cohabitation as an extension of a (Modern liberal) individualism; the prevalence and availability of contraception; criticisms of marriage as an institution, which is itself a resulting factor from another reason cohabitation may be preferred, namely divorce; economic forces that make marriage less attainable; as a positive “step” or transitional stage to marriage; and because of the increased number of years between puberty and marriage, which results on a prevalence of premarital sex (see below), while still seeking a form of social control for this sexual activity.⁵⁸³ Of these many factors, one of the most pervasive and pressuring is this delay between pubescent maturation and marriage. Nearly a decade-and-a-half now exists, on average, for young adults to wrestle with their sexual identity and inclinations, and it is clear that the Church does not have much more than a series of deontological “shall nots” to accompany young and emerging adults during this stretch of their journey. As a result, premarital sex is all but an inevitability.

⁵⁸³ Cf. Dueck, 183-184; Shenk, 27.

The predominant focus on the young, therefore, often sees the conversation devolve from one of actual cohabiting practices to their sexual behaviors and lifestyle. So much so, in fact, that one wonders if cohabitation isn't just pretense for a conversation about regulating the sex lives of young people. Premarital sex is not just the subtext at times, for Dueck cannot define what cohabitation is without sex. As she writes, "A cohabiting couple is 'a co-resident man and woman, living together within a sexual union, without that union having been formalized by a legal marriage.'"⁵⁸⁴ It seems to be (probably safely enough so) assumed that if a couple is living together, they are also having sex. However, it is unclear whether a hypothetical sex-less cohabitation would result in the same "horror stories" as those noted above. If it would, then the concern is not with cohabitation, per se, since sex is the ultimate culprit. If it would not, then cohabitation can be treated as a unique domestic arrangement apart from all the entanglements of sex. This study, regrettably, has no means by which to thin-slice the situation since this is not a question asked often enough by demographers and social scientists. Accordingly, we will have to address (again, the very likely and surely statistically more common) conflation of premarital sex and cohabitation. Yet to not give in too quickly to this conflation, a review of the premarital sex habits—and the scripts and economics that undergird these habits—will first be addressed, followed only then by cohabitation.

PREMARITAL SEX

Our guide into the premarital sex habits of young/emerging adults will be Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker's *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying*.⁵⁸⁵ The book focuses on heterosexual men and women between 18 and 23 and

⁵⁸⁴ Dueck, 181. Quoting from Gordon A. Carmichael, "Consensual Partnering in the More Developed Countries," *Journal of the Australian Population Association* 12, no. 1 (1995), 51.

⁵⁸⁵ Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

uses major longitudinal surveys from a variety of sources, as well as their own interviews.⁵⁸⁶ Every manner of sexual activity and experience is covered in the book, but beyond the specifics of, for example, which gender and race is more inclined or less toward anal sex,⁵⁸⁷ it is their work explaining and exploring both sexual scripts (and how they are changing) and the sexual economics. In our pursuit to provide a thick description of the relational patterns of individuals, especially Christians, it is more valuable to understand the cultural scripts at work, whether or if they intersect with the practices of the Church (as Hauerwas has helped us come to understand them), and then to seek a bridge between the anticipated gulf between the cultural sex scripts and the Church's narrative for marriage and sex.

Regnerus and Uecker define a sex script as “specify[ing] not only appropriate sexual goals—what we ought to want—they also provide particular direction for responding to sexual cues, for figuring out what to do and what not to do and when, who leads, and what's inappropriate to ask for.”⁵⁸⁸ In all humility, Hauerwas would have to acknowledge that his theological ethics of marriage and sex is not nearly as specific as cultural sexual scripts, which likely leads Christians to regard the Church's sex ethics as *ideals* to which they must apply specific practices. And yet the Church's influence is not completely absent from cultural sex scripts, as they “are developed through social interaction with other people, by observing them and by learning from them.”⁵⁸⁹ Hauerwas' aim to present marriage and sex as a means of witnessing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ finds social scientific justification here. *How* people live directly impacts how others around them live as well because “a key motivator of human

⁵⁸⁶ Cf. Regnerus and Uecker, 9-11. Additionally, they also provide an explanation on why the focus solely on heterosexual activity on page 7 should any reader be concerned about the narrowed focus, especially after last chapter.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, cf. 36-39.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

behavior is to enact the common scripts around us.”⁵⁹⁰ As the Church lives out its own narrative of marriage and sex faithfully, it forms and reforms cultural sex scripts. At the same time, of course, other, non-Christian scripts do exist and serve as a lure for Christians, which substantiates the needed intentionality in the Church to pursue its own narrative with rigorous faithfulness—because scripts are powerful. As Regnerus and Uecker note, “We might think ‘outside the box,’ but we don’t often act outside it.”⁵⁹¹ This reality reveals why bodies are so important—as if that shouldn’t be obvious enough already—in any theological ethics of marriage and sex. What one believes about the matter is really quite less significant than what one does, and—for Hauerwas, at least—what one does has to be guided by a broader politic in the Church that does not address sex *qua* sex but situates it within a call to perfect obedience to the Father, living a contrastive, “resident alien” life from the culture, and doing so peaceably. In a moment, we will review a few examples of the tensions created for Christians as they live between cultural sex scripts and the Church’s narrative and practices of marriage, singleness, and sex. First, though, Regnerus and Uecker’s other key insight—sexual economics—must be engaged and understood as well.

A phrase like “sexual economics” (alternatively, sometimes “sexual market” is used) probably brings to mind prostitution. And while this would certainly qualify under this category, Regnerus and Uecker explain that sexual economics are at play in a myriad of other ways and while utilizing other “currencies” apart from actual money. As the two write, “Sexual economics theory would argue that sex is about acquiring valued ‘resources’ at least as much as it is about seeking pleasure.”⁵⁹² They continue, “this theory encourages us to think far more broadly about

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 53.

the resources that the average woman values and attempts to acquire in return for sex—things like love, attention, status, self-esteem, affection, commitment, and feelings of emotional union.”⁵⁹³ The focus on women is a result of women largely being the regulators of when sexual intercourse takes place. It is also an example of how a certain cultural sex script—in this case, consent—intersects with this sexual economic theory. While consent may be little more than a subtopic of a larger and more powerful sex script around male privilege, even misogyny—its prevalence and lived reality cannot be denied. To wit: The authors recount a particular study in which attractive young men and women were both sent out on a college campus to approach opposite-sex members, express their attraction to them, and then offer them “one of three randomly selected requests: would you go out with me tonight, would you come over to my apartment tonight, or would you go to bed with me tonight?”⁵⁹⁴ The study discovered that 75-percent of men accepted the last offer, but not a single woman did. As Regnerus and Uecker note, “In the study of human behavior, social scientists rarely happen along such stark statistical contrasts as this one between men and women.”⁵⁹⁵ As a result, they can safely assert that “women can have sex when they wish to; men can only hope for it.”⁵⁹⁶

What, then, is the “price” of sex for woman? What “resources” do they hope to secure? While material access is noted in some of the interviews Regnerus and Uecker conducted—less cash exchange and more a sense of material well-being through gifts or travel or always paying for the date—less tangible resources were noted, including feeling connected, feeling personally sexy and confident, feeling desirable, and feelings of non-sexual pleasure, including being with a

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 56.

partner who is smart, funny, sociable, and/or good looking.⁵⁹⁷ Of course, women's dominant role in successful, consensual sexual congress would presumably leave them with greater social and personal control and power. Yet women's reported experiences—as well as a great deal of high-quality feminist literature—all assert the contrary. This disempowered power is a result not of the power a particular woman holds over any potential sex act, which is great, but rather of the collective behaviors of all women that create the sexual marketplace. As the authors note, women “don't single-handedly control the price of sex. That is negotiated between two individuals in the *social context* of the prices that other, similar couples set, which is why deciphering sexual norms is such a prominent theme among teenagers and young adults, especially women. They want to know what they're supposed to do and what they can expect.”⁵⁹⁸ Simply put, women's control of any potential sex act is regulated by the “cost” that other, similar women are willing to accept for the same potential sex act. If enough women will accept, for example, only internal/personal feelings of gratification—e.g., feeling sexy or confident, feeling desired and desirable—then women who want to extract a greater cost—e.g., a firm commitment, even marriage—are at a disadvantage.

All of this can feel rather dirty. Bringing economics into a conversation about relationships and sex disrupts the romantic sex scripts at work in our culture, in which sex is reserved for “love” or “meaning” or even one's “soul mate.” As a result, the sex marketplace is not so much rejected as denied in an act of self-deception (a theme which Hauerwas returns to frequently and, for reasons we can now see all the better, rightly). Most honestly put, sex scripts live in an on-going, never-ending, and unspoken dialogue with the sex marketplace. Additionally, stories of regret—for example, women who accept the momentary pleasure of both

⁵⁹⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

sex and feeling desirable, only to later feel bad that they clearly neglected their sex script for romance or commitment—are also likely to abound, which is what gives sex its tragic elements (per Williams in the last chapter). Yet while all this is true in the culture, at large, the question still remains what difference the Church, Christian conviction, and discipleship make in this context? The answer is not much, and certainly not as much as might be hoped.

To begin reviewing Christians and sex, two competing realities must be acknowledged. First, the Church *does* provide a “plausibility structure” for right, faithful sex conduct. A plausibility structure is defined as “a network of people who collectively profess and affirm a particular set of norms (guidelines for behavior) and values (beliefs about what’s important). It doesn’t much matter what the values or norms are or how odd they may seem to outsiders; social support (encouragement) and social control (pressure to conform) lend them legitimacy and make sure they persist.”⁵⁹⁹ The Church is not the only institution to have and employ plausibility structures; all human society performs in the same way. The difference is in the uniqueness—or the contrastive—structure enjoyed by the Church. Of especial note is the insight that plausibility structures can, even will, seem odd or arbitrary to outsiders, which is just a social scientific way of saying that the Church has to have a theological ethic of marriage, singleness, and sex whose intelligibility can only be found in the truth claims God makes over our lives in Jesus Christ. A fully rationale or objective (and, certainly, “factual”) accounting of a plausibility structure is simply impossible, which is why Hauerwas discourages any ethic that tries to make an “ought” out of an “is.” While the Church’s role as a plausibility structure for the sex lives of its members seems like a powerful and good thing for this topic, the second reality also has to be acknowledged, specifically the social scientifically confirmed fact that “religiosity [is] largely

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

unrelated to recent sexual partnering.”⁶⁰⁰ Why? As the authors note, “Although religiousness suggests sexual conservatism, it too—like sex—involves social interaction and participation and provides a natural setting for meeting members of the opposite sex.”⁶⁰¹ In a startling—if not, upon reflection, obvious—turn, the Church is central to Christians having sex with one another. It provides a context. Indeed, it likely also produces a new “resource” in the sex marketplace—namely, faithfulness or overtly-presented spirituality.⁶⁰²

So, Christians are in an implicit tension between the plausibility structure that the Church provides and the new marketplace it creates. Additionally, though, Christians also struggle between the Church structures/marketplace and the broader, cultural sex scripts and sex marketplace. One of the participants in Regnerus and Uecker’s interviews, Laura (19-year-old evangelical college student) serves as an example of one way that Christians try to thread the needle of all these competing claims. She and her equally devout boyfriend, Geoff, “had oral sex nearly daily for three months and never spoke about it.”⁶⁰³ While aware that this was not ideal, it did preserve “technical virginity,” which the authors describe as the “uniquely religious phenomenon: virginal sex becomes ‘the line’ past which many Christians believe they ought not to venture before marriage.”⁶⁰⁴ Another, similar young woman—Cali—shared remarkably similar sentiments, close enough to Laura (though the two do not know each other) as to betray the existence of “technical virginity” as a unique Christian sex script at work in the Church today.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁰² I’m reminded, here, of a rascal of a friend from my college campus ministry days who once noted that all a guy had to do when singing praise songs was “raise a holy hand with his eyes closed” and good Christian girls would swoon. He shared this story in front of his wife, who immediately responded, “You guys know that?!?” Clearly, the Church does not so much avoid the sex marketplace, but rather becomes a different sort of marketplace with different “goods” or “resources” that are desirable.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 32

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 31-32.

Two aspects of these examples are of particular interest—one ethical, the other relational.

Ethically, the authors note:

Cali and Laura—in step with many religious young Americans—reflect a common perspective among conservatives about sex. They're *selectively permissive*: the moral rule remains right and good and in effect, yet it does not apply to them at present, for reasons too nuanced and difficult for them to adequately describe. It's not that they're hypocritical. Rather, they feel the powerful pull of competing moral claims upon them: the script about what boyfriends and girlfriends in love want or are supposed to do for and to each other, and the script about what unmarried Christian behavior should look like. They want to satisfy both but find themselves rationalizing.⁶⁰⁵

While compassion does resist labeling such couples as hypocrites, per the authors' assertion, they (and we) would be benefitted by exploring the relational aspect that they note, but don't analyze. Specifically, the authors note, referring to Laura and Geoff's lack of conversation around their oral sex, that "we heard the very same anticonversational logic from several other Christian young adults who were in romantic relationships."⁶⁰⁶ Laura and Geoff even, eventually, sought "accountability partners" in a married, 30-something couple from their church, but a few months later when the authors checked back in with Laura, they were back to having routine oral sex and now their anticonversational policy was extending to the accountability partners too. In an interesting turn that would undoubtedly delight Michel Foucault, the (traditional) Church's regulatory function over the sex lives of its single (and, especially, young and single) members does not so much regulate sex, but speech. Unarticulated acts become part of the Christian sex script; indeed, it becomes the *functional* sex script alongside the preservation of technical virginity and contrary the traditional norms for unmarried sex in the Church. Thus, the author's assertion of the lack of hypocrisy is correct to the degree that unmarried, sexually active Christians have constructed a hybrid sex script and sex market

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 32.

that is informed by their Christian convictions. To call this script and marketplace is to risk creating an ideal that is unmoored from any concrete practices and would likely result in the creation of a secret or hidden church within the Church. A better alternative is to respond with a conversational practice in the Church that dares to speak the unspoken. To do this, though, involves exploring in greater depth the reasons and purposes—as well as the limitations—of cohabitation, while seeking if the creation of a Church practice for the intervening years between puberty and marriage is not only possible, but advisable. Betrothal, as we will come to see, could serve as that, though its evaluation through a Hauerwasian lens will still be important and necessary. First, though, to the reasons and norms for cohabitation we must attend.

COHABITATION: REASONS AND NORMS

Christian concerns around cohabitation have already been noted above, including some of the reasons and norms within the practice of cohabiting. In this section, however, we seek to go deeper through a social scientific evaluation of the practice. Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller's *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships*⁶⁰⁷ takes an in-depth look at the motives and mechanics of cohabiting couples, paying special attention to their status as either “middle class” or “service class.” Methodologically, while the book was published in 2017, the research took place in Columbus, Ohio between the Spring of 2004 and the summer of 2006. It included 61 analyzed couples—31 “middle class” couples and 30 “service class” couples. All participants were interviewed away from their partner for additional transparency/honesty in the participants. Respondents are between the ages of 18 and 36; most had never been married before. Their primary finding, to put the conclusion at the outset, is that economic status is a key marker for the type, quality, and potential success of cohabitation.

⁶⁰⁷ Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller, *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

While the Church may have its norms, sex scripts, even sex marketplace, their findings reveal that economics more than any other factor determines cohabitation. As a result, the Church risks reifying economic disparity and prejudices if it is too obtuse in its theological ethics around cohabitation. This complicating factor only further insists that the Church consider a means of folding cohabiting couples into its practices and life if both the Church and these couples have any hope of presenting Christian marriage and family as a symbolic witness to the Kingdom of God.

The centrality of economics for modern-day cohabitation can be traced back through the history of courtship in the United States. As the authors note, “In the 18th and 19th centuries, courtship rituals took place almost entirely within the purview of one’s family and friends.”⁶⁰⁸ In this era, male suitors would come to a young woman’s home, often spending time with her and her family on the porch. Economically speaking, this was the epitome of a “cheap date.” It also had the added advantage of communal support even from the very inception of a relationship. However, following Beth Bailey’s *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, the authors explain “how power shifted in the 1920s with the rise of automobile ownership and the paid date. Suddenly, young people’s actions moved beyond the eyes and ears of watchful community and family members to the soda shop, the movie theater, or lover’s lane.”⁶⁰⁹ Now, even dating required certain economics means—a car, ticket money, a meal—and the divisions that existed between classes would slowly manifest in the process of courting. One final change in courtship “occurred in the 1960s and accelerated during the 1970s, as the birth control pill enabled the sexual revolution and ushered in the era of ‘free love.’”⁶¹⁰ While premarital sex had always

⁶⁰⁸ Sassler and Miller, 21.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

existed, even in the earliest and most conservative (especially by today's standards) eras, it slowly switched from the anomaly to the norm. And while the sex itself was free, the class divisions that were now pervading courtship persisted. Sassler and Miller's study, therefore, picks up with early twenty-first century norms.

While the Church may bemoan, decry, and wring their hands about the erosion of the marital norm even amongst its own members, it has not seriously enough considered the economic motivations for this problem. Consider, for example, this Catch-22:

- "...wealth is an important predictor of first marriage. Many cohabitators say they will not wed until they have a good job and some money in the bank."⁶¹¹
- "Many politicians and social commentators view marriage as a means of reducing poverty in the United States."⁶¹²

These politicians and social commentators (often more conservative in nature) are already peddling a claim that is dubious, at best, when they claim the economic benefits of marrying, but worse yet is the ignorance to or avoidance of the fact that marriage is often predicated upon some semblance of economic security. That is to say, couples are hesitant to take on the expense of a wedding and the vulnerabilities of merging economic lives when either or both are already living on the economic margins. Even if we grant the commentator's their point, they still have failed to address the underlying economic cause for the delay in marriage. As the authors summarize, "The alternatives to marriage that have arisen over the past few decades—including cohabitation, childbearing within cohabiting unions, or remaining single—are in many ways the result of the changing economic situations facing today's young adults."⁶¹³ Another way to consider the point

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 8.

⁶¹² Ibid., 9.

⁶¹³ Ibid., 13.

is that cohabitation is a form of (necessary) economic protest against marriage's seeming complicity with unjust economic inequality. Cohabitation, which the authors describe as is 'uninstitutionalized,' meaning there is little in the way of shared understanding,"⁶¹⁴ is desirable precisely because "social norms are largely missing."⁶¹⁵ That is to say, that when one's social norms include economic stress and deprivation, the resisting norms is an act of protest. One of the questions the Church must face as it faces cohabiting couples, then, is in what manner the Church has participated in this economic inequality with its marital norms.

Economics, as should be expected now, is a significant factor in *why* couples opt to move in together before marriage. For the service class, the decision to cohabit was often a result of economic necessity wherein one or both partners might be homeless without the ability to share costs. Meanwhile, the middle class made an equally economic decision, but one of economic prudence, in which the maintenance of two abodes—especially when functional cohabitation was already happening through staying over at one another's place, sometimes every night—became unreasonable to pursue any longer and the money saved could be better utilized in their future together. In addition to these quantitative reasons for moving in together, the couples also expressed qualitative purposes as well. Interestingly, it was the service class couples who were more likely to say that "spending more time together" was a motivation for cohabitation—surprising because "spending more time together" sounds like a privilege more likely afforded to the already-economically privileged middle-class respondents. Meanwhile, the middle-class respondents saw cohabitation as the next step on the journey to marriage and as an opportunity to test out compatibility and to begin to establish their own, unique marital norms in terms of domestic responsibilities. Ultimately, this might still be the privileged expression of a

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

relationship, as the middle class had opportunity and intentionality around planning for the future that was not necessarily afforded (nor pursued) by the service class.

These examples of the economics of cohabitation are not meant to necessarily justify cohabitation, nor to privilege one model of cohabitation over another, but rather as a caution to the Church as we deliberate the ethics surrounding this form of relating. Simply put, the Church might be better to wring its hands over the pervasive grip of capitalism on all facets of life, including ecclesial life, than over the so-called or perceived moral failings of some of its members. Further, if the goal of the Church is to (re)assert the positive implications and outcomes of its marital norm, it will have to be sensitive to the economic standing of its members in discussing this topic, for while the middle class often enter into cohabitation with a positive outlook on marriage and then discover that their cohabitation confirms or even increases that outlook, the service class often find cohabitation to be just as stressful or even causes more headaches⁶¹⁶ than dating as the economic woes that coerced them into cohabitation follows them into cohabitation. As the authors note, “These challenges caused some of our respondents to presume that getting married would only make matters worse.”⁶¹⁷ As is evident in this quote, the marital norm is often under question by individuals not because of a hedonist desire for commitment-free sex (which, of course, could be easily achieved *without* cohabiting), but because the value associated with that norm is under question.

The result of the author’s study raises sincere questions about some of the above-cited concerns about cohabiting, especially those surrounding abuse. While the statistics are likely reliable, they are also inadequate as they do not clearly delineate the economic standing of those in cohabiting relationships. Ultimately, we might find with further study, that economic need

⁶¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

corresponds to abuse at far greater rates than mere cohabitation; or, put differently, that cohabitation is being scapegoated for economic inequality's sins. Something like this certainly seems at play in Sassler and Miller's concluding remarks about cohabitation across the economic spectrum. As they write, confirming (especially conservative) Christians' worse fears, "Given our findings, we argue that at least among the less educated, cohabitation is weakening the institution of marriage, because it reveals how arduous it can be to remain together 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer' when it seems that the future holds more economic deprivation than wealth."⁶¹⁸ Meanwhile, for wealthier couples in the middle class, "better financial trajectories combined with supportive family, friends, and community led to a brighter view of the future. As a result, rather than challenging the institution of marriage, cohabitation is part of the process."⁶¹⁹ Of course, Christians of every stripe—Progressive and Traditionalist—may still lament that "cohabitation is part of the process" of getting married. However, this may be a problem with an easier solution than the problem facing poorer couples for whom marriage is suspect in its very complicity with their experience of economic deprivation. Simply put, "Short-term economic uncertainty undermines long-term relationships, stability, and commitment. It diminishes aspirations for the future."⁶²⁰ And this uncertainty persists over and against the romantic sex scripts of the culture for "even those who described the early stages of their romance with dewy eyes quickly fell back to earth when bank accounts ran low, hours at work were cut, or household chores piled up because of time away from home juggling work and school. Relationships can provide individuals with nurturance and support but love alone is not enough."⁶²¹ Not, of course, that the Church should further peddle the romantic accounting of

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 177.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 177.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 193.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 193.

marriage and sex any further than it already (sinfully) has, but even a recourse to a cultural myth is not going to save marriage in the Church. Ultimately, the Church's greatest warning comes from Sassler and Miller's last line of their book: "Continued inattention to the factors that prevent many young people from achieving their marital desires, however, will serve to further weaken marriage and strengthen cohabitation as an increasingly attractive alternative."⁶²² If, then, the goal of the Church is to reestablish its marital norm—if it desires to confront cohabitation as not being, in Hauerwasian terms, an office or practice of the Church—then its solution will have to take both poor and rich's experiences of cohabitation into consideration (as well as continue to find other ways to resist capitalism's dominion over society and culture). It might just be the case that betrothal can serve this function if it is retrieved and utilized well. To betrothal, then, we must turn.

RETRIEVING BETROTHAL

Cohabitation, as a word, is rooted in the social sciences more than theology. That is to say, that the vast majority of Christian commentators take sociological terms and definitions and then seek to apply a theological bent to it. What has been lacking throughout these pages is to use one of the tactics of Stanley Hauerwas and seek to discover if the Church has its own language by which to describe a certain practice or behavior. To be sure, there are very likely times and places—probably the majority of instances—where the language provided by a non-theological discipline that is used to describe a particular event or manifestation is easily and rightly adaptable to the Church. For instance, the Church does not need its own way to speak about gravity. However, when the Church finds itself in a situation like exists with cohabitation—that is, where even vast numbers of its own membership are participating in the

⁶²² Ibid., 193.

practice, where silence is normal, and where confusion abounds—it is reasonable to ask if part of the problem is the language and presuppositions being brought to the topic from fields that are otherwise theologically afar. To try to channel some of Hauerwas’ pith (and hopefully his wisdom), we might say that cohabitation is not an office and practice of the Church—those designations belong to the cooperatively totalizing designations of “single” and “married”—and therefore the Church does not have language by which to talk about it. At which point, Hauerwas tends to move the conversation back to something the Church is actually authorized to speak about, such as singleness and marriage. Following his lead, then, we are encouraged to ask if the domestic and relational practice known as cohabitation is either singleness done poorly, or marriage done poorly? (That it is a poor practice is being presumed here, as the overwhelming Christian witness would say so). The answer, we discover, is both.

Already, above, we noted that there were different types of cohabitation. Shenk and Dueck provided five and four types, respectively, and with considerable overlap between them. While their typologies are interesting, Adrian Thatcher’s more simplified binary is a better avenue for discussion. Thatcher holds that “the distinction is between ‘prenuptial’ and ‘non-nuptial’ cohabitation,”⁶²³ wherein the former occurs between a couple who will marry (whether they acknowledge that at the outset of their cohabitation is only partially relevant) in the future and the latter is understood as a couple who will never marry, or who have chosen cohabitation as an intentional alternative to marriage. Put in Hauerwasian terms, we discover that the former (prenuptial) are potentially doing marriage wrong, while the latter (non-nuptial) are likely doing singleness wrong. That is, of course, if we seek to frame the discussion in the terms and practices provided for by the Church. In both instances, of course, pastoral care is still due the couples, but

⁶²³ Adrian Thatcher, *Living Together and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45.

this particular way of framing the issue is helpful for delineating the focus and type of care provided. As Thatcher kindly notes, “Just as there is a qualitative difference between those who do and do not intend marriage, so there can be a corresponding difference in theological judgment about the type of relationship being shared. If a couple intends marriage, it is surely a failure of charity to subsume their evolving relationship under the rubric of fornication.”⁶²⁴

Inspired by this Hauerwasian approach and informed by Thatcher’s clarifying distinctions, then, the rest of this chapter will be dedicated to focusing on prenuptial cohabiters. Non-nuptial cohabiters are of equal value—and provide, probably, an even more interesting case study for theological ethical reflection—but this winnowing focus is in service to the focus of this subsection, namely, the retrieval of “betrothal” as an office and practice of the Church and the means by which prenuptial cohabiters might be folded into the Church’s witness, as well as find language with which to make their relationship intelligible.

To reclaim betrothal, we are first aided by understanding the developments of marriage in Europe and North America of the last half millennium. For while the process of becoming married—from moving from singleness to lifelong, monogamous, covenantal partnership—is presumed a fixed and settled matter with little more than the color of the bridesmaid’s dresses mutable, the opposite is in fact the case. Thatcher again aids us by noting that twin movements—one ecclesial and one political—are what created marriage in its current manifestation. As he writes, “Only after the Council of Trent in 1563 was a ceremony compulsory for Roman Catholics. Only in 1754, after the Hardwicke Marriage Act had been passed, was a ceremony a legal requirement in England and Wales.”⁶²⁵ Prior to this time, any number of marriage rites took

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁶²⁵ Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 109.

place, including clandestine marriages and what we might call today “common law marriages.” Interestingly, even while the Church held certain ideals in place, these other forms of matrimony were still accepted and embraced as true marriages, full of the same means of grace (especially for Roman Catholics for whom marriage is a sacrament). In fact, prior to the creation of a marriage as signified and legitimated by a ceremony, both the Church and some cultures (Rome among them) practiced a two-step approach to marriage. In the Church, these distinct phases went by the names “spousals” and “nuptials.” Spousals names the practice of defining the terms of the marriage including, in part times, any issues around the dowry. It was a communal act, between two families, and held a certain degree of binding authority over the lives of all participants. After the spousals, the couple would be regarded as essentially married or well on their way to marriage. At the very least, we can claim that after the spousals, neither member of the couple could be considered to be holding the office of, or practicing the disciplines of, singleness. Nuptials, then, names the self-giving of the two partners through vows and consummation—what the Roman Catholic Church understands as the *ratum*, or free consent, of the couples paired with the *consummatum*, or sexual consummation of the couple.⁶²⁶

So, why the change? As Thatcher notes, “The achievement of the widespread belief that a marriage begins with a wedding was not so much a *religious* or theological, but a *class*, matter. The upper and middle classes had the political clout to enforce the social respectability of the new marriage laws, and they used it.”⁶²⁷ Economic and political power joined forces in Victorian society and created the single wedding event as the means by which a couple was found legitimate. The Church held little or no role in creating this condition (though it can be assumed that it held a certain complicity, even still). Thatcher hints at a point made at the end of the last

⁶²⁶ Cf. Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity*, 120.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

subsection above when he writes, “there is no longer any formal provision for the staged entry into marriage. In the absence of this, it is possible to read the practice of cohabiting but not-yet married couples as a return to earlier informalities, and as a rejection, not so much of Christian marriage, but of the bourgeois form of it that became established at the end of the eighteenth century and was then consolidated in the Victorian era.”⁶²⁸ This resonates closely with the hypothesis that today’s cohabiters may actually, at least in part, be participating in a form of economic protest against the current economic forces at work on marriage and in society.

The key point here, putting aside the nefarious working of powers and principalities from the past, is that marriage may best be understood in terms of “staged entry.” Such progressive movement into the making and living out of marital vows may inherently be something that can only be engaged rightly and faithfully in a step-by-step manner. If this is the case, then the movement—a rather recent one at that—to a singular event for marriage denies something in the very ontology and ethic of marriage. One cannot deny something essential and still expect positive outcomes. And this is precisely the reasoning behind Thatcher’s attempt to reclaim or retrieve betrothal, for betrothal is a process by which a couple moves, slowly, carefully, communally, and intentionally, into the office and practice of marriage. Once marriage is unshackled from its recent past and permitted to reach back into its premodern history, betrothal not only becomes an option, but also helps narrate and qualify the practices of marriage. As Thatcher writes hopefully, betrothal can “restore to marriage the sense of growth and journey and greatly expedite the churches’ proclamation and commendation.”⁶²⁹ Betrothal would have within it a sense of exclusivity and commitment that would mark it as distinct from other, lesser forms of courtship. It would also be binding to a degree, though the possibility for breaking it

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁶²⁹ Thatcher, *Living Together*, 74.

would still exist. However, it would be viewed—ideally by both the community around the couple and the couple themselves—as essentially akin to marriage, since it is prefiguring marriage. Simply put, it would be the beginning of marriage.

Yet for betrothal to be assumed as a valid possibility today, some sort of narrative will have to give it meaning or intelligibility. Thankfully, the Bible abounds, in both Testaments, with just such stories, though by far the most popular is the betrothed status of Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Evaluating this story must begin with two acknowledgements. First, the relational status of Mary and Joseph is only recorded and preserved by the Church for theological reasons. The very fact, for example, that Jesus’ birth to a virgin mother goes unnoted by Mark, Paul, and John⁶³⁰ is evidence enough that the New Testament is uninterested in Mary and Joseph, *per se*. Genealogical accounts of Jesus’ lineage are theological assertions, not the right and accurate recording of history *qua* history. Second, Matthew and Luke’s accounting of Joseph and Mary’s relational situation was founded upon a whole host of unwritten, cultural assumptions, including the history of other betrothed couples in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is, simply put, a historical-critical challenge to sitting in a contemporary, non-betrothal cultural context and reading about a historic, betrothal context. The gulf is not unbridgeable, but when paired with the theological intentions of the New Testament, the story of Mary and Joseph can hardly be read as a “how to” manual for betrothal. As such, following Thatcher, the most that can be fully asserted is that betrothal *is* the beginning of marriage, which may be no better indicated than Joseph using divorce language in his intention to secretly separate from Mary.⁶³¹

More significant, however, than the socio-historical accountings of betrothal found in Scripture is the symbolic way in which betrothal is figured into eschatological visions of God’s

⁶³⁰ Cf., *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶³¹ Cf., *Ibid.*, 120.

relationship with God’s creation. Thatcher neatly and correctly pairs Ezekiel 16 and Ephesians 5—both prophecies that present God’s eschatological reign through the metaphor of sexual intimacy and marriage. In both passages, God enacts a covenant—specifically through cleansing—*prior* to any union. Symbolically read, the covenant is the betrothal (or spousal), and the union is the marriage. Partnership between God and God’s elect, then, presumes betrothal. Indeed, the Church’s theology is not only nuanced, but enhanced by presenting marriage as a two-staged process. As Thatcher writes, “Betrothal adds an edge to the eschatological consummation. There is an eagerness and anticipation about the coming future because pledges have already been made.”⁶³² All too often, the contemporary Church neglects the import of the eschaton for doing its theology. An Evangelical focus on soteriology alone—arguably the defining cultural witness of Christianity in the United States during the last half of the twentieth century—makes heaven a destination, not a description of what life with God will be and, through the eucharist, already is. Retrieving betrothal as a means of understanding the eschaton results in a more accessible, experiential sense of anticipation and hope, all while still maintaining the surety of the covenant sealed in Jesus’ death and resurrection. In fact, it is not incorrect to argue that it is this theological truth that reveals betrothal-marriage, rather than betrothal-marriage serving as a mere metaphor for this theological truth. Thatcher does a particularly good job in analyzing Ephesians 5 in both an anabatic and katabatic manner. By anabatic, he means, “An analogy of this kind might be assumed to *begin* with a human, finite comparison which is then extended in order to illustrate some aspect of the relation between God and humankind. In that case, the direction is from below upwards, or *anabatic*.”⁶³³ Its opposite, then, means:

⁶³² Ibid., 141.

⁶³³ Ibid., 137.

the direction of the analogy is also from above, downwards, or *katabatic*. If so, then the primary term is Christ's love for the Church. The one-flesh union which is human marriage is secondary. The primary reality is the one-flesh union between Christ and the Church which is achieved in the self-gift of Christ in his sacrificial death. On this view the greater reality is the 'great mystery' or the 'paschal mystery' of the union of God with humankind in the passionate love of Christ's passion. The vocation of marriage is that of living the paschal mystery with one's spouse. This *is* marriage on a Christian understanding, and preparation for it is preparing oneself to love one's partner as Christ loved and loves the Church.⁶³⁴

For the Church to speak cogently about cohabitation, it must first be able to speak cogently about marriage. And, as we now discover, for marriage to be at all intelligible, it must find its participation in God's self-gift in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection. Additionally, betrothal is revealed as a katabatic metaphor for the intervening period between Christ's resurrection and return. More than merely finding betrothal present in Old and New Testaments as a mere cultural artifact of the time, we learn that it is part and parcel with God's very reign over history. Given his importance to this part of the chapter, Thatcher deserves the last word on this subsection: "Betrothal and marriage are what they are in Christianity not simply because they are pre-Christian social conventions, but because the love of God made known in Christ is the paschal mystery which is also a union of one flesh."⁶³⁵

CONCLUSION

What remains to be seen, now, is whether Hauerwas' marital and sex ethics has space for retrieving betrothal and, if so, what—if anything—would need to be nuanced in what he has written in the past. First, though, let us review the argument of this chapter. We began by noting that there is much Christian consternation around the cohabitating practices of (especially young) Christians. If this consternation has any glimmer of hope in it, it is precisely that factions that are typically at odds with one another on many other matters of marital and sex ethics, find a

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 137-138.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 142.

common unity in their anxiety. At the same time, the numbers do not lie, and Christians are cohabiting at rates high enough to be normalizing the practice. Of course, these Christians are aware that these practices fall outside the scope of Christian orthopraxis and so silence results on the topic. Furthermore, silence is almost baked into the practice of cohabitation, since it is uninstitutionalized and therefore does not have even a firm cultural narrative by which to speak itself. Lurking beneath both the cohabitation anxiety (by the Church) and the silence (by Christian couples) is the inconvenient conversation about premarital sex. To be sure, sexual congress is assumed by those whose hands wring in worry over cohabitation since no Christian leader—pastor, theologian—has expressed unease over asexual opposite-sex roommates.⁶³⁶ And Christians are having premarital sex, even if some strive to maintain “technical virginity”—that is, any sex act that is not vaginal intercourse. In a tragic twist, though, our readings have revealed that it is money, not sex, that drives most cohabitation. For the working poor, or service class, cohabitation is a result of potential homelessness without it, or—at best—the merging of two incomes into one home in order to make basic ends meet. For more educated and affluent, or middle class, cohabitation is a decision of economic prudence in which money is saved by both partners through sharing domestic expenses. Finally, cohabitation *may* be a form of resistance or protest—especially for the service class—against an economic system that demands they marry but does not pay them enough to feel comfortable making such a large commitment. That is to say, cohabitation may begin as a practical reality, but it soon develops a symbolic sense over and against late-stage capitalism in the West.

⁶³⁶ To be sure, some, more conservative Christian leaders would raise concerns over this, but if pushed, their arguments would not be about the inherent or evident sinfulness of that living arrangement, but rather the “temptation” or the “slippery slope” of the arrangement. An analogy might be found here to being gay. No orthodox Christian claims that the very inclination toward same-sex intimacy is sinful; it is only the act itself. And since it is presumed that sin is crouching at the door, proactivity is the name of the game for committed Christian discipleship. Even still, the main point holds that cohabitation is often but a code word for the unspoken sexual congress of young Christians.

It was into this matrix, then, that we attempted to recover betrothal from Christian history as a means by which Christian couples who were nuptially-oriented could find sanctity for their living conditions, while also permitting the Church to come alongside them in this beginning stage of marriage (just as the Church comes alongside traditional marrying couples by serving as witnesses to their vows and by providing sustained support and encouragement through their years together). Betrothal only fell out of vogue, interestingly and ironically, after economic influences shifted marriage to the single ceremonial act. What was not discussed above, because there is no clear consensus on the matter, is whether betrothed couples could engage in sexual congress prior to their nuptials. The nitty-gritty of this particular topic was not, however, so much avoided as replaced with a theological description of the one-flesh union between Christ and the Church in order to provide a theological backdrop for any such consideration. The reality is, different regions and different times had different standards regarding sex and betrothal. On the one hand, betrothal carries with it so much of the weight of marriage—it is public, it is a binding commitment, it involves the consent of the participants—that denying sex as part of this arrangement seems overly burdensome, even incomprehensible given the nature of betrothal. On the other hand, what, then, would remain in and for the nuptials? To be sure, the commitment would be more permanently bindings—and that is not nothing—but the rest remains the same, except for the nuptials to carry with it not only the permission, but now requirement, of sexual consummation between the couple. It is here that the katabatic metaphor of Christ-as-bridegroom and Church-as-bride finds its real traction in the conversation. For, if the Church already shares a one-flesh union with Christ via the Eucharist—which sacramentally prefigures the heavenly banquet of the eschaton—but is not yet in that eschatological reality and is therefore still anticipating and waiting, then the analogy could (maybe should?) be extended to acknowledge

that one-flesh partnering of a betrothed couple is of a piece and is permissible. Just as the Eucharist is *not* the heavenly banquet, so betrothal sex is *not* the consummation of nuptials.

Of course, one cannot almost hear the anxious interlocutors on this topic clamor in their protestations that such an arrangement could be easily manipulated and abused. This is true. Young Christians could, for example, meet on a Friday night, have an intense, but sexually chaste date on Saturday, declare their betrothal during Sunday worship, and then engage in whatever sexual play they desire for as long as they still find each other alluring. Once the magic of the moment has worn off, they could reveal that the betrothal will not result in nuptials, play-act their sadness over this fact, and then do it all over again. Yet those who worry over such possibilities without acknowledging and confronting these exact same realities taking place in marriage—marriage, which has become little more than serial monogamies for the economically well off because of the ease of “no fault” divorce—reveal that their deepest concern is over young sexuality and not the institution and sanctity of marriage. They reveal a penchant for policing young bodies more than chastising philandering married bodies. Concerns over hypotheticals should not trump convictions about actual realities. Additionally, while the chance for the above-described manipulation does exist, it likely does not exist limitlessly. The Church would still reserve the right to *not* bless a proposed betrothal if, for example, the same young man was betrothed five times before and is already living with a woman who is not his betrothed.⁶³⁷ Simply put, the Church will only be as complicit in the manipulation of betrothals as it already is for marriage. That may not sound optimistic, but the possibility remains that retrieving betrothal will actually *enhance* the Church’s witness in, to, and through marriage and may even result in more stable, meaningful, and faithful marriages.

⁶³⁷ Yes, this is a clear head nod to the Samaritan Woman (at the Well) in John 4. Thatcher actually addresses this story well for those who are interested. See: Thatcher, *Living Together*, 139-141.

What now remains to be seen is how betrothal, so understood, does or does not fit within Hauerwas' theological ethics for marriage and sex. The initial appraisal is not favorable. Hauerwas has written extensive, if not—per his style—occasionally, on marriage, but has never raised the specter of betrothal. Indeed, he has even highlighted arranged marriages in a favorable manner, but still nothing on betrothal. Of course, silence is not the same thing as rejection, but for a scholar with over forty published books and scores of other essays, the notion that he has not encountered betrothal is difficult to sustain. Simply put, for such a prolific author, silence may imply a dismissal of the idea. Arguments from prolificacy notwithstanding, Hauerwas has robustly defined the offices and practices of the Church as, seemingly exclusively, marriage and singleness. One can imagine his contending that those who wish to get betrothed should just go ahead and get married. After all, those who get married cannot understand what they are committing too—since who understands what a “lifelong” commitment can mean after any period of time other than a whole life?—and so an additional season of betrothal for means of growing one's commitment is but a waste of time. There will never be enough growth for marriage to make sense; one merely gets married (if so called) and figures it out from there. If anything, Hauerwas would be inclined to celebrate the service class cohabitators, not for their cohabitation, but for their prophetic witness over and against capitalism's grip on the sacred institution of marriage. He would regard them as “morally superior”—in a manner akin to his “Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)” article—precisely because they know what they are standing against. For Hauerwas, there always appears to be something alluring about *any* contrastive model of living, even when that contrastive model is not qualitatively the same as the Church's contrastive existence in and to the world. One can speculated, if he were to grant betrothal, it would only be because he thinks the Church has

already made enough of a mess of marriage through divorce that he would not count betrothal as any less unintelligible than the Church's marriage (and singleness) practices. None of this, of course, is a ringing endorsement for betrothal and serve as reasons why it cannot be incorporated into Hauerwas' marital and sex ethics.

Yet hope remains precisely for this integration since Hauerwas' theological ethics of marriage and sex is not *only* in its structures—that is the office of “married” and “single”—but also in its political function. As he writes, “any sex ethic is a political ethic.”⁶³⁸ On a footnote to this sentence, he adds “I would suggest instead that the form and extent of our sexual expression is best correlated to the extent we are willing to intermix our finances. It may sound terribly unromantic, but I am convinced that one of the best tests of ‘love’ is the extent to which a couple are willing to share a common economic destiny.”⁶³⁹ Precisely! Cohabitation is already deeply rooted in shared economic life—maybe even more pressingly so for the service class, but still as a function of financial prudence for the middle class—and thus an opening is made by which cohabitation, now recast liturgically and communally as betrothal, presents this sex ethic as a political ethic of finances. Of course, even this appeal to shared finances leaves this sex ethic in the realm of the individual, so Hauerwas continues that it is the community that gives marriage, sex, and (we hope) betrothal its meaning. This is not to say that because marriage exist in the Church (or, potentially, betrothal) that individualism is conquered, for—as Hauerwas also notes—“the ecclesiology of most of the more liberal sexual ethics assumes that the church is a voluntary association that exists for the spiritual enrichment of the individuals composing it.”⁶⁴⁰ By this, I take him to mean, that since the Church, too often, presents itself as a place of

⁶³⁸ “Sex in Public,” *HR*, 493.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, 493, fn. 15.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 496.

individual, personal fulfillment, it cannot help but have a marital and sex ethic that follows suit, wherein marriage and sex are equally pursued for nothing more than self-enhancement, be that through pleasure, a sense of security, or any other tangible or non-tangible good a couple expects from their nuptials. Of course, if the Church has done this to marriage—a sacrament in some traditions—then not much more can be expected from it once it incorporates betrothal into its life and theology. Yet, just maybe, because betrothal has to be retrieved from a premodern era, an era that was also devoid of the individualism of Modern liberalism, there is at least a chance that more than just betrothal comes back from history to today. Indeed, the Church may make a polity decision to permit betrothal, only to later discover that it has to change other aspects of its shared life together if its commitment to betrothal is to be made intelligible. Or, put in the terms that Wells provided in the last chapter, the Church may make a “third sense” polity decision and then discover that it needs a “first sense” theology to make this decision intelligible. The very act of seeking that intelligibility will require a reappraisal of Modern liberalism’s individualism.

It is here that betrothal begins to sound like a program which Hauerwas can get behind. For, we discover, that far from retrieving betrothal in order to put a Christian sheen on the already-practiced cohabitation of many Christians, betrothal will permit these Christians to live—liturgically and communally—as a contrastive model to their cohabiting peers. Indeed, an entire contrastive litany is created wherein the world practices loneliness, but the Church has an office and practice of singleness that is still blessed by the friendship one finds in Christ. Similarly, the world practices cohabitation, but the Church has betrothal as an office and practice through which marriage begins and sex can find its public, political expression. Finally, the world has self-fulfilling (and, therefore, self-serving) marriages, but the Church has the office and practice of marriage as a lifelong, committed monogamy through which Christians learn to

keep promises they make, even when they don't know what they are promising, which is—
itself—a fine enough description of one's baptismal confirmation and membership in the
Church, since one does not know the full costs of following a crucified Lord prior to the
experience of following such a Lord.

Furthermore, recounting Hauerwas' understanding of marriage not being able to be
understood is a reminder that marriage exists as a form of sanctification (per Williams and
Rogers from the last chapter). This is a reminder of “Hauerwas's Law,” which states plainly,
“You always marry the wrong person.”⁶⁴¹ He goes on to note, “like any good law it is, of course,
reversible. You also always marry the right person.”⁶⁴² This seeming logical incoherence is
Hauerwas' way of attempting to describe the *process* one undergoes in marriage, specifically the
process of learning to be vulnerable, share life, understand yourself as determined by a
community (maybe first by the marriage, but primarily and ultimately by the Church), embrace
the contingencies of life, and be open to the procreation and raising of children. All of these
events are character-forming. An apt analogy might be found in Hauerwas' understanding of the
role children play in forming our character in Christ. Rather than rehash his essays on the matter,
though, an appeal to one of his published prayers is helpful:

Children, Father God, give us children. Give us those balls of energy that mess up and
confuse our lives. Give us the unrelenting need children are, so that we are pulled into a
world of love otherwise unimagined. Give us the story time children require, so that we
might be restored by their love of us. Help us love these strange creatures in a manner
that our love of this child does not tempt us to kill other children so that the children we
love be safe. Help us remember that you would not have us love even our children with a
love undisciplined by the love you have shown us in the crucifixion of your Son. So
cared for, may the sheer exuberance of children make us joyful just to the extent that we
learn that the patience children teach us is your Kingdom.⁶⁴³

⁶⁴¹ “Radical Hope,” *HR*, 513.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 513.

⁶⁴³ *DT*, 125.

Reviewing this prayer closely, we find that children are not only the manifestation of the hope we have that the world is not God forsaken, but also that having and raising children teach us to be better Christians. “Confuse our lives,” for example, is put a prayer for learning to rightly live out of control. Loving children as strangers teaches us to love other strangers we meet. Pacifism even makes an appearance because this is Hauerwas, after all, and of course it does. Finally, loving children is disciplined by what we learn of love through God’s own sacrifice. The point here is that, for Hauerwas, all of life—if taken thoughtfully and faithfully as members of a community—can and will build our character. While he has his clear emphases on certain “forms”—i.e., the office and practice of marriage and singleness, discussing what is and is not promiscuity instead of debating the inherentness of same-sex attraction—Hauerwas remains quite sensitive to the *function* of our decisions. Therefore, that we always marry the wrong person (and the right one) is an indication that marriage has a function to play in a person’s life, maybe most especially—in the most extreme moments of conflict—what it means to “love thy enemy.” Marriage, sex, and family are a school of virtue which only finds its intelligibility because it is part of a more determinative community called the Church. It is not a stretch to consider how betrothal may serve a similar function, especially as it is retrieved as an office and practice of the more determinative community called the Church.

Finally, Hauerwas teaches us to skillfully question the functional norms at work in society today. Sassler and Miller provided a concise history of courtship in America and through it we discovered that today’s changes to that courtship, specifically the inclusion of cohabitation, is not so much a radical departure from yore, but just another in a long line of changes. The question, then, should be turned back around. Instead of asking “why betrothal?” we should be asking “why dating? Why engagement? Why a single-ceremony nuptial?” We have already seen

that the forces driving these changes are more economic than theological, so why accept the status quo (even and especially a presumed non-cohabiting status quo)? Why are Christian parents and pastors more accepting of the young adults in their lives “going on a date” than they are of cohabiting? Surely sex can (and does!) occur in both. It cannot be about premarital sex alone. No, once so framed, it becomes clearer that the Church’s current courtship practices are not really the Church’s at all. They are on loan from the world. It is no wonder, then, that Christians so schooled in such syncretism fell so easily into the world’s newest form of courtship—cohabitation. Making matters worse, some Christians might be inclined to accept the world’s guidance—just so long as no premarital sex occurs—as a way of being “relevant” to the world. Yet a Church that merely reflects the world back to itself can never live out its witness to the world. Frankly, the world will not be all that interested or enticed by Christians doing what the world is already doing, except without one of the more fun parts. Once Hauerwas’ contrastive model is paired with his focus on character formation through the ordinariness of life and partnered with his understanding of the Church as a witness to the world, and then still add to that a chance to reclaim a practice not tainted by Modern liberalism, betrothal sounds not only like a possibility, but a mandate.

This chapter began by borrowing Shenk’s metaphor of cohabitation entering into the church like a “flood.” While she clearly meant this as a negative image, we might recall Noah and the Ark, a story that—though full of death and destruction—is ultimately about salvation and new covenants. Maybe cohabitation *is* like a flood and, assuming that the Church encapsulates this practice using its own history of betrothal, we are on the precipice of a new salvation and covenant in the marital ethics of the Church. Yet another metaphor will serve us even better. As Thatcher writes, betrothal and marriage “might be exemplified by the difference between a

rehearsal and a performance of a play or piece of music. While performance cannot be *replicated*, it can be, and ought to be, *anticipated*, as far as possible. Why not the same for marriage?"⁶⁴⁴ Thatcher rejects accusations that betrothal is a "trial marriage" that falters because it does not share the same lifelong commitments as marriage by changing the metaphor (interestingly, from an economic metaphor in which "goods can be bought for a trial period by a consumer and then returned to the vendor if the purchaser is not completely satisfied"⁶⁴⁵) to that of rehearsal/performance, in which the performance is deemed as important enough to warrant practice of it, even before "the big day." This is a metaphor familiar to Hauerwas, who writes with Samuel Wells in their *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* that

life *is* a rehearsal. Worship is indeed a kind of play with a different set of rules—for, without such games, who would recognize that 'real' life is also a set of games with their own rules? Worship has a set of rules that time, tradition, and providence have honed and honored, and Christians believe that the set of rules they practice and embody in worship is a *good* set of rules, a set by which they may identify and judge other sets.⁶⁴⁶

The retrieving of betrothal, as an office, practice, and liturgy of the Church and as a means of confronting and transforming the world's practice of cohabitation, can be a form of worshipful play in which it embodies a good set of rules by which to challenge and witness to the other sets of rules provided by a Modern liberalism for which cohabitation is just another form of self-fulfillment and the avoidance of the loneliness, ironically enough, created by the individualism of liberalism. Far, then, from wringing our hands, the Church has the opportunity to clasp them together in prayer during the betrothal liturgy of its prenuptial members.

⁶⁴⁴ Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity*, 127.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁶⁴⁶ *BCCE*, 4.

Conclusion

Why the Church Deserves Our Best

We began by taking seriously the “culture wars” that have arisen from both beyond and within the Church after the so-called “sexual revolution” in the mid-twentieth century. That this culture war could find such a home within the Church is the result of two major factors. First, social and sexual norms were going through a sea change—though, in conversation with the rest of history, this sea change was on par with others, but with one exception. Beginning in the Victorian era, love-marriages came into vogue as a response to the ever-increasing role government and business was playing in ordering society. Once, the family unit provided such social ordering and, as a result, the rules and norms regulating the family were made intelligible by narratives thicker than mere sentiment between two people. After the love-marriage revolution, the point and purpose of marriage (and, thus, sex) was made more into a question than a statement. Second, the Church’s influence in America began to wane considerably during the mid-twentieth century. I would contend that this waning was the result of a guilt-ridden population finally having to look its “original sin” of the African slave trade in the face, which was then paired with its most grievous sin of dropping nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all of which led to a cultural state of moral confusion to which the Church could *not* rise in pastoral care because the Church in America had been more than complicit in these harms, as is to be expected for a Constantinian Christianity. This Constantinian complicity, which now took the form of the Church’s presuppositional allegiance to Modern liberalism, meant that the Church accepted the Modern construction of “public” and “private” spheres with the Church understood as the presumed governor of the “private.” And so, moral confusion was reigning in the public sphere, but the Church was both complicit in that reign *and* had willingly

foreclosed its authority in all matters public, which meant that it sought means to both reassert its authority *and* proclaim its relevance. The so-called “sexual revolution” provided a robust enough foil for these purposes. In many regards, the Church—having succumb to Constantinianism—now lived parasitically off of the culture to which, theologically-speaking, it had been sent as witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ. To be sure, the culture—quite independent of the Church—was having a social-sexual reckoning, as was all-but inevitable after it had adopted love-marriages a century before. And had the Church had a thick enough narrative, meaningful enough practices, and a Spirit-sustained character, it may very well have been in an ideal position to pastor to the culture in this moment. However, none of these elements were attending, or at least not in great enough scope, and so the Church saw within the culture’s interest in marriage, sex, and the family an opportunity for it to reassert its relevance and credibility, since much of its credibility had been (willingly) sacrificed on the altars of production (slavery) and war (atomic bombs).

Of course, the Church was already fragmented enough at this time—with scores of Protestant denominations making up the majority of the American Christian witness, but with meaningful contributions still being made by Catholic and Orthodox Christians as well—that even the unspoken goal of reasserting cultural relevance was undercut by the varieties of approaches to marital and sex ethics that the churches offered. Throughout this dissertation, I have used the more antiquated, capital-C “Church” not because I am unaware that empirically “churches” makes much more sense, but because the implied unity and authority of “Church” is still a worthwhile aspiration for the people of God in contemporary America. However, as I hope has also been made clear, this “Church” is not meaningful and does not derive its authority from its cultural relevance, of which it has none to speak of it and which may not be a good goal in the

first place, but because the Church lives as a contrastive model that confronts the world's ills in order to witness to the healing and redemption available to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Given this Hauerwasian commitment to a contrastive model of the Church and the Hauerwasian understanding of the Church as a witness to cultural powerbrokers (and not an actual powerbroker itself), enough rhetorical and epistemological space was hopefully created in which to engage a topic that, by my own admission above, has too often served as the idolatrous host for the churches' sense of power and meaning. To accuse generations of American Christians of such idolatry—and to intentionally employ liturgical language like “host” in the process—is to court accusations of being *too* Hauerwasian, that is, in adopting his bombastic and inflammatory rhetorical style. However, those sentences were written—albeit sadly—as an honest assessment of the state of the Church in twenty-first century America. The adoption of a Hauerwasian approach, then, is honestly meant to provide a balm on what ails the Church by insisting that the Church approach topics like marriage and sex from a thoroughgoingly Christian perspective that has been informed by the thick narrative of its Scripture and tradition, has been (or, at least, can be) enacted in its disciplines and practices, and is sustained by a community that is continually interpreting its own actions and life together as it seeks the goods it finds meaningful to hold in common.

Such a task as the one stated immediately above is not simple nor easy. It involves untangling the Church's historic commitments to Modern liberalism, the modern nation-state of America (including all of America's wars and violence), contemporary late-stage capitalism, *and* its own convoluted history with all these powers and principalities. It means witnessing to both state *and* Church—the former with our message of justification by faith in Christ alone and the latter with our call to living exemplary, holy, and sanctified lives. Added to these challenges was

addressing two “hot button issues” like same-sex marriage and cohabitation, which were selected not only because they were places where greater clarification of a Hauerwasian theological ethic was needed, but also because they are the two most challenging issues at work in the Church in America today. This is, if I can say so in all humility, a most monumental task. It has been taken on in all integrity and love. Whether it has succeeded is largely dependent upon the definition of success one brings to the table (or, more liturgically yet, the Table). If success is founded in an immediate response of all Christian denominations and each of their parish churches, then success is unlikely. However, if success is defined by learning anew to approach these topics through the lenses of a Scripture-interpreted reception of Scripture (or, in a canonical criticism mode of interpretation) that begins with an insistence on the unity of the Church as a social ethic and which pursues liturgically derived practices that form the character of every member, then success is possible. For, at the moment, the Protestant churches in America are in a place of disarray and perpetual fragmentation and schism, the likes of which are far more sinful than any gay marriage, any trans clergy, any cohabitating couple. Simply put, at this particular point in American Church history, success is better defined as staunching the bleeding.

Of course, this dissertation has sought a more wholistic approach to this staunching than the one routinely offered over the last 20-plus years in Protestant denominations, namely the pursuit of the “local option.” “Local option” is an umbrella term meant to describe any denominational polity that leaves important questions about Christian marital and sex ethics to local churches—whether that polity attends exclusively to the ordination of gay or trans clergy (a topic not addressed in this dissertation) or the far more common same-sex marriage.⁶⁴⁷ For those

⁶⁴⁷ “Local option” is language borrowed from my own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but something quite comparable is present in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s position of “conscience bound.” “Local option” has the advantage of more clearly denoting *who* is being spoken about—e.g., a local church—and is thus used for that reason alone.

who have adopted, whole sale, this local option theology, my claim to be trying to staunch the bleeding while simultaneously asserting the sanctified and blessed nature of same-sex marriage may ring disingenuous. And it is, but only—of course—if one trusts “local option” to be a meaningful hermeneutic for interpreting Church life. Increasingly, it is evident that this is just simply not the case. Additionally, one cannot staunch the bleeding in the Church by simply rejecting same-sex marriage, since it is same-sex attracted bodies that make up part of the members of the Church. They cannot be systematically harmed for the sake of the community. Or, alternatively, if they can, then they have been recast as the actual Body of Christ, which is pierced and crucified for the people of God. However, gay Christians need no more be crucified than straight Christians because the Christ’s intercession for us has already achieved all we might even hope to achieve in our own crucifixion.

In recent history, “local option” was presented as a “big tent” approach to maintain institutional integrity within Christian denominations, though this act simultaneously hollowed out what these denominations had to say so that while the institutions may have held together better than the feared alternative, it was by no means clear what they were holding together *for*. That is to say, such churches, as *witnessing* bodies and *not* institutional ones, had to sacrifice the heft of their witness for the sake of the institution. And if we are to complete the history of the Church’s relationship to marriage and sex that was begun in the Introduction, we must attend to this final, contemporary move of exerting “local option” throughout the vast majority of Protestant denominations in twenty-first century America.

Why did “local option” take hold in so many Christian denominations? The answer is complex—probably worthy of a dissertation of its own—but at the very least, the Church’s historic (and contemporary) commitment to Modern liberalism and its ideal agent as the rational

person who chooses, has to be fingered as one of the culprits. For “local option” fits this Modern construct too neatly to honestly receive any other articulation or apologetic for it. “Local option” is rooted in choice—the choice of each congregation to choose a polity position that it thinks will converge with the assumptions of the majority of its members so that they, too, do not exercise their agency through choosing to leave the church/denomination. The folly to this approach is found in the assumption that the act of choosing would terminate with each church’s Session/Board/leadership team. But once the act of choosing has been reified as a spiritual good, then there is nothing to stop individual lay members from *also* enacting this sort of polity in their own individual lives and choosing to either step in or out of a particular church based upon the “local option” chosen by the church’s leadership.

Similarly, the sort of Christian piety that had taken hold of the Church, which had accepted the public/private split enforced upon it by Modernity, also malformed the Church as a *community*. Indeed, if one wanted to be polemical (or just simply nasty), it is not unrealistic to say that “local option” is the failed cultural syncretism of a Christian Baby Boomer generation whose ethics were founded upon their own commitment to unmediated self-expression and who, therefore, could only ever conceive of the Church as a community where they “find themselves,” rather than one in which they lose their lives for the sake of finding them in Christ. That is to say, “local option” is undergirded by Modern liberalism’s choosing agent *and* a Christian piety best expressed in the story of Jesus’ encounter with the “rich, young ruler” (cf. Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-27; Luke 18:18-23), which is ultimately a story about finding the limits of what one is unwilling to choose to do for the sake of following Jesus. The rich, young ruler falters not because of his own moral ineptitude, but more foundationally in his assumption that he can choose his way into a relationship with the Christ. For, ultimately, the Church is founded upon a

story of God making a choice—the Cross—that no one else could make. *All* members of the Church are members upon this divine choice, not upon their own. As such, building a polity on such *atheological* grounds is to build a polity that is inevitable in its failure. At the very least, the polity enacted rendered the Gospel unintelligible—and people are not inclined to suffer an unintelligible narrative when other, more-intelligible-even-if-idolatrous narratives are readily available. In a manner of speaking, Modern liberalism has evangelized and catechized Christians a fair bit better than Christians are presently able to return the favor, even if the evangelism and catechism of the world is central to the Church’s witness.

Of course, a more generous interpretation of the move to “local option” is available. It may just be that such an option—even with all the presuppositional and systemic issues attending to it—was never meant to be the *best* option, but merely the *first*. It was pursued as a political decision in search for a theological justification. And while such an approach is clearly methodologically impure, it is often the case in virtue ethics that ethical choices are made where too many contingencies attend to be able to actually, accurately choose correctly. In such instances, the instances which Hauerwas’ theological ethics trains his students well—rootedness in narrative, community, and character—are essential if the decisions made are to even approximate holiness. Indeed, much of Hauerwas’ inconsistency and even seeming ambivalence around the topic of same-sex marriage may very well be an honest admission, accurately enacted, of what a topic with so many contingencies look like. This would, at any rate, explain his ultimate acceptance of Samuel Wells’ first-, second-, and third-order senses of the church. Hauerwas is aware that the Church has no first-sense proclamation about same-sex marriage because the Church has lost its first-sense proclamation about opposite-sex marriage. At the same time, it was increasingly apparent from the third-sense witness issuing forth from gay

Christians' lives that holiness and discipleship were quite possible. Ergo, a polity decision—a third-sense form of ordering the Church if ever there was one—is made that then goes in search of a first-sense theology. This is why it was so important to review the different inclusive theologies in chapter three, for if the order of the day is to find a first-sense theology, then the Church cannot accept anything but the best. Chapter four was my attempt, utilizing the skills and resources provided to me by Hauerwas' methodology, to provide that “best.”

So, has this dissertation been a success? To the degree that it has accurately read the moment of time in which it finds itself—namely, a time when “local option” is readily crumbling because of its clear structural flaws—and to the degree to which it has accurately understood the challenge before it—namely, articulating a first-sense theology for marriage (in general) and same-sex marriage (in particular)—then it is hoped that it is a success. At the very least, unlike much of the theologies being presented at the same time when “local option” was in full bloom, it had the privilege of perching itself above or beyond that particular mode of thinking and could lean into the full resources of the Church's Scripture, history, tradition, and liturgy to guide a renewed and reformed sense of marital and sex ethics. That is to say, that those commentators and scholars who wrote during the height of the “local option” era were always, even if implicitly, concerned with the apologetic task of justifying one choice—in this case, same-sex marriage inclusion—over another choice. But apologetics are never going to rise to the level necessary to meet first-sense theological needs. As such, those commentators are no more to be blamed for working out of the context in which they found themselves, any more than I hope I will be blamed for doing the same. For the context has shifted. “Local option” is wearing thin. Gay Christians and their allies, especially, are increasingly uncomfortable sitting in the limbo created by a local option polity. They are uncomfortable because such an option continues to

leave gay Christians vulnerable to the barbs and harms of unchecked prejudice (for, to be sure, there is nothing inherent to “local option” that precludes simple prejudice from reigning supreme). They are uncomfortable because the vision of marriage—gay or straight—presented by a local option polity seems thin or shallow. They are uncomfortable because local option is rooted in division not unity—and their greatest hopes are still for an inclusive unity, therefore they cannot forever abide in an inherently conflictual political arrangement. Most of all, their discomfort is not a result of failed nerve or piety or overwrought sensitivities, but rather—and maybe against all odds—they have been formed by a Gospel that demands an eschatologically-mediated understanding of how we live our lives today and local option draws us forever away from such a theology.

The approach I have offered in these pages for a theology of same-sex marriage inclusion in the Church has been done in an effort to bring the Church back into conversation with its historic (read: pre-Victorian era) understanding of the practice and office of marriage. Today’s Christians are led to believe that the major difference facing marriage is that between opposite-sex marriage and same-sex marriage, but Hauerwas’ theological ethics instead teach us that the opposite of straight marriage is not gay marriage, but singleness. Of course, an option could exist—and is exhorted by some Christians and denominations—that same-sex attraction means that those Christians are called to singleness. But such an approach neglects the uniqueness of the call to singleness and uses it as a catch-all for anyone who cannot meet the idealized *form* of opposite-sex marriage. (On this point, there is a vast field of study still awaiting scrutiny that takes the form of detailing, for example, how opposite-attracted Christians with cognitive disabilities can share in the blessing of marriage, for—like their gay counterparts—these individuals have often been dismissively lumped into the “called to singleness” catch-all once

“singleness” is no longer theologically understood, but sociologically enforced). This aside to the misuse of singleness by some Christian denominations and traditions notwithstanding, once marriage and singleness are understood as offices and practices of the Church, the questions posed to them are better approached by understanding the specifics of what each office/practice offers in the way of ongoing sanctification in the Lord. When we ask that question, we discover that marriage names a practice of learning to live up to commitments one cannot understand—of which, the commitment to following Jesus is the most supreme—as well as the practice of living vulnerability with a spouse with the hope that grace will attend to all the wounds that are bound to occur when two people make such a radical pledge to one another. As such, to cut off gay Christians (like the eunuchs before them were “cut off” from the cultic and liturgical life of Israel) from these spiritual benefits is not so much an affront to their “rights” to such benefits (for there is no narrative in the Church that can make “rights” intelligible), but rather an affront to the purpose of the Church to continually witness to and catechize its members. Simply put, gay marriage should be included in the Church because marriage is one of the means through which its members learn to grow in holiness. In a topic that too often has boiled down to attempts to justify same-sex marriage, we discover the ironic twist that the real topic for discussion is not justification, but sanctification. It is no wonder the Church exhausted itself in these pursuits, for not only were they ill-conceived, they were grossly mistargeted.

One of the unfortunate side effects of the quarter-century (or more) debate around same-sex marriage is that it provided cover for straight Christian couples to follow the culture into cohabitation trends that are by no means healthy for relationships nor sound in their witness to a waiting world. While clearly homophobia plays a significant role in why Christian denominations lost themselves in the sexual habits of the smallest of minorities in their midst

while failing to acknowledge comparable flaws and problems with the vast majority, simply asserting prejudice does not do this spiritual blindness justice. For, ultimately, cohabitation was permitted to reign not only because Christian churches hated their gay members and coddled their straight ones, but because both same-sex marriage *and* cohabitation revealed the moral incoherence the Church had been perpetuating around Christian marriages for generations—at least since the aforementioned Victorian era. Simply put, cohabitation is likely the only outcome in a system with two predominate factors: First, the centrality of love-marriages and, second, ready access to no-fault divorce. For even though the divorces were legally labeled as “no-fault,” experience proved, time and again, that this did *not* mean “no consequence” divorce. The current cohabitators are a generation raised during a time when 50-percent of all marriages ended in divorce and thus it is keenly aware of the lived traumas of divorce. Such a circumstance would, therefore, make any reasonable person wary of getting married. Now, add to this the notion that marriage is ultimately rooted in a couple’s private love for each other—and whose public manifestation is little more than the economically burdensome pomp and circumstance of a wedding and reception—and these couples reasonably deduce that cohabitation is at least on par with marriage for safely housing their private love. The grand irony is that those who feared easy access to divorce would result in the erosion of marriage by making it too easy to leave, what actually occurred was the erosion of marriage by making it too scary to enter into—and all the more so when it was unclear what added advantages (beyond some legal/tax code advantages) marriage could provide a couple. Simply put, divorce caused people to flee marriage (as an institution) not their marriages (as a personal commitment).

And so, cohabitation rose in prominence in the Church at the precise time when the Church was too beleaguered by its commitments to fighting over same-sex marriage to make

time and space for this new ecclesial issue. Yet the cohabiting practices of so many Christians does not only reveal ecclesial exhaustion with issues around marriage and sex. It also reveals how disconnected the Church had become from its own historical practices around marriage. The retrieval of betrothal offered in this dissertation is recommended not, primarily, as a therapy for otherwise sinfully cohabiting Christians, but first and foremost as therapy for the Church by reconnecting it with itself. That betrothal also exists as a distinct enough form of intimate relationships as to make it contrastive with the culture's cohabitation is but an afterthought to the first-order goal of guiding the Church to reclaim its rich heritage and the resources stored safely in its past. The contrast is found in the meaning of the differences between cohabitation and betrothal. The former but names a practice of asserting one's private sentiments for another through economically beneficial means. Its touchpoint to any broader community is found only in its consumerist commitments. In contrast, betrothal is part of the liturgy of the Church, which means it is a community-sustained, narratively informed practice, office, and discipline of the Church. It asks something of its participants. It promises to be for them part of their larger, ongoing transformation in the Lord. It shares in the very glory of the Lord through its reactive commitment to one another—that is, because Christ tabernacles or cohabitates with the Church via the Holy Spirit in a season that is *prior* to the great wedding banquet of eschatological consummation, so too can betrothed Christians find a share of this divine action in how they order their lives together. Simply put, “betrothed” best describes the status of the Church after Jesus' resurrection, but *before* His return. And if, at their best, marriages receive their own meaning in a katabatic manner from the marriage of Jesus as bridegroom and the Church as bride, then betrothed couples can receive their own meaning by learning to embody a place between what is and what will be—that is to say, by learning to embody a place of lived hope.

Central to all these insights—insights that hopefully successfully steer the Church toward a more productive, theologically-sound conversation; insights that are seemingly given space or context by a Church yearning for theological intelligibility for its political commitments—is the theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas. Of particular import within his vast methodological approach is the role that a symbolic world mode of interpretation of Scripture plays in his thinking and writing. For, by emphasizing the symbolic, issues like marriage—which might otherwise fall into ontological traps of determining their appropriate *form*—are placed in a new light that refocuses the Church on what marriage is *for*. Hauerwas shifts the conversation from “form” to “for”; from “content” to “character”; from proscription to prescription. His theological ethics refutes the Modern binaries in churches where either pro-Progress or pro-Tradition colonizes the Christian imagination by detailing the ways in which the Church’s tradition is the means of its progress, and by recentering debates around particular individuals to concrete communities. However, he is no mere communalist, as his concern remains for particular individuals and the particular ways they will grow in holiness in the Lord. Far from wanting to secure them their “rights,” he wants to see them secured by the Church’s “rites.” For the cultivation of their character in Christ can never happen apart from the community in which Christ has placed them. And as this is true for gay Christians or cohabitating Christians, so it is true for all Christians, which means now is the time to recommit to a narrative, community, and character thick enough to sustain us in the work before us of witnessing as God’s alternative to the violence, deprivation, and chaos of the world.

For commitment is central because the opposite of “option” is not compulsion, but commitment. Let the Church, therefore, be united in this commitment.

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