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Marriage, Gender, and Doctrine

Mike Higton

Introduction

In many of our churches – not least in my own Church of England – we are arguing about marriage, and our arguments go deep. In this chapter, I try to diagnose one of the deep currents of disagreement that lends energy to our arguments, and ask where it might take us.

In the first two parts of the chapter, I will provide an exposition of two recent official reports on marriage from the Church of England. I will highlight the ways in which their arguments about marriage rely upon an account of the essential complementarity between men and women.

In the third part, I will provide a brief critique of this complementarian account of gender, pointing to some problems with the appeals to biology and history that help drive it. The reports make those appeals, however, because they insist that our understanding of marriage should be responsive to the natures that we have been given in creation. I therefore turn in the fourth part to suggest an alternative way of thinking about what such responsiveness involves. My alternative way of thinking, I suggest, might lead to a rather different account of marriage's nature and function, because it would be unlikely to continue appealing to the supposed essential complementarity of men and women.

In the final section of the chapter, I take a step back from this discussion, and suggest that one of the questions facing the Church, as its members pursue this kind of debate about the nature of marriage, is whether the complementarian account of gender is a core Christian teaching. Must we, now that our disagreements about marriage are forcing us to ask questions about gender with renewed urgency, define complementarianism as a doctrine of the Church?¹

¹ My exposition in sections 1 to 4 was first developed in a series of blog posts at mikehigton.org.uk, from 1 March to 25 April 2014. I explore some of the ideas in Section 5 further in Higton 2016.

Marriage and Complementarity

I'm going to start with the Church of England's official 'Response to the Government Equalities Office Consultation – "Equal Civil Marriage"' (Church of England 2012). In 2012, the Government published a consultation document, seeking views on 'how we can remove the ban on same-sex couples having a civil marriage in a way that works for everyone', while insisting that 'no changes will be made to how religious organizations define and solemnize religious marriages' (Government Equalities Office 2012: 1).

The Church of England's formal response makes two moves that are at least partially independent. It argues that the proposed legislation is contrary to the 'intrinsic nature of marriage', and it argues that there will be legal problems with its implementation, and in particular with its guarantees about religious marriages. I will focus on the first of these strands (the argument about the intrinsic nature of marriage), because it is in that strand that the centrality to the debate of questions about gender becomes most clear.

The argument of the document can be summarized as follows.

1. There is an essential complementarity between men and women – an 'underlying, objective, distinctiveness' (§10).
2. The essential complementarity of men and women is biologically grounded, even if it is not reducible to capacity for procreation. Procreation certainly matters in the report. It is, according to the report, fundamental to the definition of marriage that the couple be '*open* to bringing children into the world as a fruit of their loving commitment' (§25, my emphasis); it quotes the *Common Worship* liturgy to the effect that marriage is the 'foundation of family life in which children may be born' (§2). More precisely, marriage relies upon a 'biological complementarity with the possibility of procreation' (§6); more precisely still "This distinctiveness and complementarity are seen *most explicitly* in the biological union of man and woman which potentially brings to the relationship the fruitfulness of procreation' (§10; my emphasis). Procreation does not, however, exhaust the meaning of complementarity: 'And, even where, for reasons of age, biology or simply choice, a marriage does not have issue, the distinctiveness of male and female is part of what gives marriage its unique social meaning' (§10).
3. The acknowledgement and expression of this essential complementarity of the sexes is therefore necessary for the flourishing of human society. Properly

acknowledged, complementarity will be expressed in specific and distinctive contributions from men and women in all social institutions. The report states that ‘a society cannot flourish without the specific and distinctive contributions of each gender’ (§12). After all, this is a fundamental reason for supporting ‘the deeper involvement of women in all social institutions’ (§12). This is why gender complementarity has been recognised and expressed in societies down the ages; it is ‘enshrined in human institutions throughout history’ (Summary): such recognition and expression serves ‘the common good of all in society’ (§4), and is of high ‘social value’ (§12).

4. Acknowledging and expressing this complementarity is central to the purpose of marriage. ‘Marriage benefits society in many ways, not only by promoting mutuality and fidelity, but also by acknowledging an underlying biological complementarity which, for many, includes the possibility of procreation’ (Summary.) This is what the document means when it speaks of the ‘intrinsic nature of marriage as the union of a man and a woman’ (Summary), and says that ‘marriage in general – and not just the marriage of Christians – is, in its nature, a lifelong union of one man with one woman’ (§1). The emphasis falls firmly on ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Of course, there are other goods proper to marriage – mutuality and fidelity – but these are not at issue in this debate, nor are they unique to marriage (§9). ‘[T]he uniqueness of marriage – and a further aspect of its virtuous nature – is that it embodies the underlying, objective, distinctiveness of men and women’ (§10).
5. Marriage is the *primary* social institution by which our society acknowledges and expresses this complementarity. ‘Marriage has from the beginning of history been *the* way in which societies have worked out and handled issues of sexual difference. To remove from the definition of marriage this essential complementarity is to lose *any* social institution in which sexual difference is explicitly acknowledged’ (§11, emphases mine).
6. If marriage ceases to be a way for our society to acknowledge and express this complementarity, our society’s capacity to acknowledge and express it at all will therefore be seriously reduced, and society as a whole will be harmed. This is why the report describes the government proposals as constituting an attempt ‘to remove the concept of gender from marriage’ (Summary). And this is what is meant by the claim that the proposals would ‘change the nature of marriage for

everyone' (Summary). It is not that the authors of the report think that the strength of my marriage will be undermined if other people enter into a union of which I disapprove. Rather, they think that marriage as an institution will be less capable of performing one of its most important social functions if it ceases to be clearly defined in gender terms. And this is also what the authors of the report mean when they say that the legislation will involve 'imposing for essentially ideological reasons a new meaning on a term as familiar and fundamental as marriage' (Summary). The ideology in question is, they believe, one in which 'men and women are simply interchangeable individuals' (§12) – which is the only alternative the report imagines to its own account of essential gender complementarity. And all of this is why the report can say that this is not (directly) an issue about the acceptability of homosexual sexual activity, but rather about the fact that 'the inherited understanding of marriage contributes a vast amount to the common good', and that this will be lost, 'for everyone, gay or straight', if 'the meaning of marriage' is changed (§5). 'We believe that redefining marriage to include same-sex relationships will entail a dilution in the meaning of marriage for everyone by excluding the fundamental complementarity of men and women from the social and legal definition of marriage' (§13) and 'the consequences of change will not be beneficial for society as a whole' (§8).

In other words, marriage is presented in the report as the means by which we recognize and express an essential gender complementarity. This complementarity needs to be recognized and expressed not simply for the sake of marriage, but for the sake of society as a whole, which will only truly flourish when the specific and distinctive contributions from men and women are given full expression in all parts of its life.

Men and Women in Marriage

In 2013, a follow-up to the Church's response to the Government consultation appeared, in the form of a report from the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission (FAOC) entitled *Men and Women in Marriage* (Faith and Order Commission 2013).² It can be read as providing a more carefully articulated expression of the theology

² I am myself a member of FAOC, and I was a member when the report was proposed, when it was discussed, and when it was published. As a member, I share responsibility for the report, even if (as is often the way with reports produced by committee) it does not represent my own

of gender contained in the earlier document.

In the Foreword, the Archbishops say that it aims to provide a ‘short summary of the Church of England’s understanding of marriage’ and, more fully, that

It sets out to explain the continued importance of and rationale for the doctrine of the Church of England on marriage as set out in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Canon B30, the Common Worship Marriage Service and the teaching document issued by the House in September 1999 (in Faith and Order Commission 2013: v).³

That description could be misconstrued, however. The Faith and Order Commission’s report did not provide an evenly balanced summary of all the main things that the Church of England has wanted to say about the nature and purpose of marriage, but was an attempt to set out more fully the background in the Church of England’s thinking to the specific arguments made in the debate about same-sex marriage. Nearly everything in the report is (as the title says) about the necessity of marriage’s taking place between a man and a woman, and about ‘how the sexual differentiation of men and women is a gift of God’ (§3). Other topics (including such central topics as faithfulness and public commitment) appear only briefly, and only insofar as they relate to that central topic.

Like the original response to the government consultation, then, this is a report about gender. It speaks about the importance of gender difference to marriage, but also about the wider importance of gender in society.

The report is arranged around a very clear central vector. It begins with creation, and moves towards culture. That is, it begins with sexual difference as a feature of the natural world (a defining feature of human biology) and then argues that human behaviour (our relationships, our institutions, our culture) should respect and respond to

views. The report was, however, ‘commended for study’ by the Archbishops in their Foreword, and it has seemed to me that the best way for me to accept my responsibility for it is to take that commendation seriously: to study the report, to ask what agenda it suggests for further deliberation, and to pursue that deliberation vigorously.

³ Canon B30, part of the canon law that provides the legal framework for the Church of England, can be found at www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/churchlawlegis/canons/section-b.aspx, and the marriage service, part of its authorized liturgy, at www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/pastoral/marriage/marriage.aspx. The 1999 teaching document mentioned in the Foreword is *Marriage: A Teaching Document* (House of Bishops 1999).

this feature. The report is, in other words, an exercise in ‘natural law’ ethics (§9). It is an exercise in describing how our behaviour should be regulated so as to do justice to our (physical, biological, ecological) nature. ‘Not everything in the way we live, then, is open to renegotiation’, it says. ‘We cannot turn our back upon the natural, and especially the biological, terms of human existence’ (§10).

This argument begins with a claim made about marriage found in the Church of England’s marriage liturgy: that it is ‘a gift of God in creation’ (§2, 5, 6). Or, in the words of an earlier report (House of Bishops 2005, quoted in §2), marriage is ‘a creation ordinance.’ In other words, marriage is underpinned by, and gives expression to, a structure of the natural world (§8). And that means that it is underpinned by, and gives expression to, a fact about us as human beings that runs deeper than our politics, our economics, and our cultures (§6). It is underpinned by, and gives expression to, something beyond all the relativities of history: the biological fact that we are, naturally, sexed creatures. Our sexual differentiation is cultural as well as biological, but its biological aspect is fundamental, underpinning all its other aspects. This biological aspect is not restricted to (though it certainly includes) our capacity for differentiated involvement in the process of procreation (§3).

Marriage is, according to the report, given to us as a way of acknowledging and expressing this natural differentiation. The report does not use the word ‘natural’ to describe marriage itself. Rather, marriage is an institution that *responds* to nature. Nevertheless, the report makes it clear that to form lifelong, monogamous, exogamous (that is, not with relatives), male-female relationships, for the sake of reproduction and the nurture of children, is a primary way in which we can live in accordance with our biological nature.

When discussing the nature of marriage as lifelong, monogamous and exogamous, the report says that ‘most developed traditions give these three structural elements a central place in their practices of marriage’ (§18), and that the exceptions ‘have tended to be of limited scope’ and ‘hardly amount to a significant challenge to these structural foundations’ (§19). The idea here is that history reveals nature. We can look at the patterns of relationship that have prevailed and flourished across multiple human societies, and see in them clues to the underlying natural structure to which they are responding. And the idea underlying *that* is that cultures can only truly flourish if they are shaped in accordance with nature.

The report therefore argues that ‘we need a society in which men and women relate well to each other’ (§12), where the word ‘well’ clearly means ‘in accordance with the complementarity found in nature’. Marriage is our central means of ensuring that relationships between man and women achieve this goal. It is ‘a paradigm of society, facilitating other social forms’ (§13). Marriage (in the sense of a lifelong, monogamous, exogamous, male-female relationship, ordered towards procreation and family life) therefore ‘enriches society and strengthens community’ (§15, quoting the marriage service), and is ‘central to the stability and health of human society’ (§2, quoting House of Bishops 2005 on civil partnerships).

What are we to make of all this?

Gender, Biology, and History

Let me begin with the positive. The aspects of this theology that I am most readily able to affirm are its insistences that to live well involves responding attentively to our bodiliness, and that we are not bodily in the abstract but always as particular sexed bodies. We receive that particularity, that differentiation, as a gift from God. As *Men and Women in Marriage* says, ‘Persons in relation are not interchangeable units, shorn of whatever makes one human being different from another. They are individuals who bring to the relationship unique experiences of being human in community, unique qualities, attributes and histories’ (§25).

I do not believe that our options reduce to complementarianism on the one hand (the belief that to respond adequately to our bodiliness primarily means acknowledging and distinguishing the essentially distinct contributions of men and women) or some kind of free-flowing and effectively disembodied individualism on the other (in which the constraints and possibilities yielded by our differently sexed bodies play no appreciable role, and ‘men and women are simply interchangeable individuals’, as the response to the government consultation says in §12). Nevertheless, the basic point about taking embodied difference seriously is a very important one.

That very affirmation, however, gives rise to serious questions. First of all: it gives rise to questions about *what it is* that we are given in our ‘nature’, and *how we know* what we have been given. The stress in *Men and Women in Marriage* on the biological underpinnings of marriage suggests that what we are given is fundamentally our biological constitution, and that this can be known by means of natural science. The words ‘biology’ or ‘biological’ turn up six times, mixed in with the thirteen occurrences

of ‘nature’ or ‘natural’, and there’s an explicit mention of the way in which ‘the marvellous ordering of the created world’ is discovered in ‘physics and biology’ (§8). This report was intended to communicate the Church’s understanding of marriage to a wide public audience, and I think the strongest message conveyed about how we arrive at that understanding is that it is squarely based on the scientific facts of human biology.

Attention to biology can certainly yield the idea that procreation requires the involvement of someone with male reproductive organs and someone with female reproductive organs, and that is certainly not a trivial matter. And yet it is – to say the least – questionable whether attention to biology will underpin the broader claims of the report. After all, attention to the facts of human biology doesn’t yield a neat differentiation of male and female characteristics (see further Susannah Cornwall’s and Ben Fulford’s chapters in this volume); it doesn’t yield the idea that all the human beings that God has created can be neatly divided into ‘men’ and ‘women’ (see further Raphael Cadenhead’s chapter); and it doesn’t yield the idea that lifelong, monogamous, exogamous relationships are biologically natural in a way that other patterns of relationship are not. More appears to be being built on biology in the report than it can bear, and biology on its own would seem to push us to rather more complex conclusions than this report allows.

The argument does not, however, rely exclusively upon this appeal to biology. There is also an appeal to history. Both *Men and Women in Marriage* and the earlier document suggest that we can look at the patterns of relationship that have prevailed through history, and see in them clues to the underlying natural structure to which they respond, a structure that is itself beyond the relativities of history.

Yet history both reveals and conceals nature. We are indeed called to respond attentively to our bodiliness, and we are indeed not bodily in the abstract but always as particular sexed bodies. True flourishing does require some such responsiveness, as the reports suggest. Furthermore, we do only know the nature of our bodiliness, including our sexed bodiliness, through the ways in which we have responded to it through history. That is, we know the constraints that our sexual differentiation imposes upon us and the possibilities that it creates for us only by knowing how it has been registered as constraint and as possibility in specific ways by human beings in our history together.

And yet it is also important to acknowledge that all of those historical responses are inadequate, and open to challenge. We can’t point to any historical example and say, ‘Here is where we see the constraints and possibilities of sexed bodily existence

registered truly and completely.’ We have become increasingly aware in recent years that our history is in large part a history of the *misidentification* of the constraints and possibilities that our sexed bodily existence yields – whether we have claimed that having a female body obviously means a moral and intellectual incapacity for the serious business of voting, or that girls are naturally interested in pink toys and boys in blue.

The brief reliance in the reports upon the history of our responses to sexed bodily nature suggests that those responses tend very largely to fall into one groove. They are canalized by the shape of the underlying biological landscape over which they are flowing. Yet it is far from clear that the diversity and complexity of our history reduces to the canalized form suggested in the report: that there is one main groove into which marriage has fallen in human history, and that the various exceptions to that groove have been (as *Men and Women in Marriage* says) ‘of limited scope’. It is equally clear that where, for large parts of our history, our marriage practices *have* fallen into a groove, that it has seldom been something to celebrate without reserve (as Charlotte Methuen notes in this volume). The grooves into which our practices have fallen have very often been deathly.

The appeals to biology and history in the reports are, therefore, problematic. The problems with them are not simply technical problems, however, of interest only to academic theologians. They have sharp edges that intrude deeply into everyday life. We have, after all, a very, very bad history of appealing to nature and to history when speaking about the proper roles and relations of men and women. We have a toxic, death-dealing history. We have used appeals to the ‘obvious’ facts of biology, and appeals to the ‘obvious’ lessons of history, to oppress and to abuse. And that history is not a tale of long ago and far away; it is all around us still.

We live in a world, and continue to *make* a world, in which we restrict the lives of women and of men by telling them fables about what is naturally appropriate to them thanks to their gender. We continue to build a world in which toxic myths about ‘normal’ family life are used to exclude and to demean – to underwrite our poisonous profligacy in naming others’ relationships as inadequate or dysfunctional or unnatural or malformed. We continue to build a world in which we use our valorization of marriage, as a bond forged from links that are prior to law and culture, to mark out spaces in which violent abuse can hide.

What our problematic history reveals is that our attempts to register and respond to our bodiless are fallible and fraught, and that we are far from done with the process of learning to respond well. We do not yet know what it means to respond truly to our

sexual differentiation – but to understand the import of that realization for our thinking about marriage, we need to change the terms of our discussion, and shift from talking about the relationship between biology and history to talking about on the relationship between creation and redemption.

Redeeming Creation

Men and Women in Marriage quotes the *Common Worship* marriage service to the effect that ‘as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind, as Christ is united with his bride, the Church’ (§39), and then expands that to say, ‘The encounter of man and woman in marriage affords an image, then, of the knowledge and love of God, to which all humans are summoned, and of the self-giving of the Son of God which makes it possible’ (§40). A little earlier, it had spoken of marriage’s attaining ‘a permanence which could speak to the world of God’s own love’ and of this as a matter of our species’ ‘spiritual vocation’ (§33).

In other words, the report presents marriage as a means by which human beings learn to embody and to communicate God’s love, and suggests that marriage can be a sharing in, a participation in, a love that is prior to it: God’s own Christlike love. God’s love is marriage’s context and goal, and that love therefore defines marriage. Marriage is, fundamentally, ordered towards Christlike love.

To run with these ideas, however, might take us in a rather different direction from that marked out by these reports. We are, these ideas suggest, not simply called to live in attentive response to our bodiliness, but to live in attentive response to our bodiliness *in the light of God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ*. Christian ethics, then, is not simply about conformity to creation, but about creaturely participation in redemption. Redemption is the fulfilment of creatureliness, so that the route to *true* response to our created nature is by participation in redemption. Redemption does not abolish or override but brings to fruition our creatureliness. Creation and covenant belong together, because the Creator is also the Redeemer.

The call to live in response to our created natures is not, therefore, to be thought of primarily as the imposing of a constraint already known or knowable to us without regard to redemption. It is the call to discover together the possibilities of godly growth and transformation that our created natures give us. It is the call to discover the particular forms of flourishing that our bodies make possible, and to discover the particular ways in which we, as these particular bodies, can become by the Spirit’s work

conformed to Christ, and so become particular icons of God's love, communicating that love in a way that no other bodies could.

That transformation might therefore be thought of as a craft, working with the grain of the material at hand to make something beautiful, something that speaks ever more clearly of God's love. It is a transformation that happens under the discipline of the material with which we are working and under the discipline of the word that we are called to let that material speak, the word of Christlike love. But those two disciplines are inextricable: we only discover the *true* nature of the material with which we are working as we discover how it can speak this word. Our 'nature' is not a neutral biological fact: it is the particular possibility that we have been given in creation of communicating the love of God, and we will discover that possibility in it only as we discover how to communicate that love.

A Matter of Doctrine?

My language is meant to suggest that this task of disciplined discovery is an ongoing one. That is, I am deliberately suggesting that we are still in the process of discovering the ways of speaking about and responding to sexual difference to which we are called by the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. And that means that I am deliberately suggesting that our accounts of and practices of marriage are also properly a matter of ongoing discovery. And by saying all this, I am suggesting that the answers to that question are not already clear to us. God has given us marriage, but that gift is one that we are still receiving.

This does not mean that 'anything goes', or that marriage can mean whatever we feel like letting it mean. The process of discovery that I am suggesting is a matter of spiritual discipline, and of growth in holiness. It will be informed by a careful attentiveness to the full complexity of what scientific investigation can show us, but we will not simply be able to read off our answers from the results of such investigation. It will be informed by a careful attentiveness to the full complexity of the history of human practice in this area, even if much of that attentiveness will take the form of the penitent discernment of sinful distortions. Most importantly, however, it will be informed by our attentiveness to what we learn of the love to which we are called from Christ and Christ's witnesses, and by the purification of our distorted loves in prayer and worship.

I have also been suggesting – though I realize that I have done no more than suggest, and that I have certainly not demonstrated my claim – that these explorations

will be likely to lead us somewhere different from the complementarian understandings of gender found in these two church reports, and from the gender-focused account of marriage that is built on that foundation. Both of the reports that I have analyzed, however, strongly suggest that the Church does not have the freedom to take its exploration of marriage in that direction. As *Men and Women in Marriage* says, ‘Not everything in the way we live, then, is open to renegotiation’ (§10). Most directly, the Church’s response to the government consultation on same-sex marriage claims that its understanding of marriage is ‘a matter of doctrine’, ‘derived from the teaching of Christ himself’ (§1), ‘derived from the Scriptures’, and ‘enshrined within [the Church of England’s] authorised liturgy’ (§2). It strongly suggests, therefore, that the whole complementarian account of gender that it sets out is itself such a ‘matter of doctrine’.

One way of construing the debate within the Church of England is as a debate about precisely this claim. Is gender complementarianism a doctrine of the Church? After all, whilst it is clearly true that the Church of England has consistently assumed that marriage involves a man and a woman, it has not before been brought before to face squarely the question of why that is so, and whether it has to be so, and it has not been brought before to face squarely the question of the status of the account of gender that the reports believe underpins that assumption about marriage. One could therefore see the debate as pushing for a decision on this matter: a decision on whether these claims about gender (and so about marriage) are properly a matter of doctrine.

To ask this question is not, I suggest, quite the same as asking whether this account of gender is *true*. There are many true things that are not properly doctrines of the Church. The Church might be united in believing that Canterbury is to the south of York, and might rely upon this assumption in numerous documents, and we may be satisfied by every means proper to the investigation of such a claim that it is true. That does not make this claim properly part of the Church’s doctrine. To see whether it should be counted as doctrine of the Church, we need to ask not just whether it is true, but whether the Church *has* to teach this truth in order to be faithful to its calling to proclaim the gospel in word and deed.

It is not enough to find that a teaching is *present* in tradition or in Scripture; it is not enough to find that a teaching is *consistent* in tradition or in Scripture; it is not even enough to find that a teaching is *pervasive* in tradition or in Scripture. To be given the status of a doctrine of the Church – a formal claim about the proper limits of our explorations – a teaching must satisfy a further condition. It must be *necessary* to support

the Church's proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The motto for the process of determining such doctrinal limits could therefore be provided by 1 Corinthians 2:2: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'

Consider (to give an unrelated example) Christian disagreements about the doctrine of creation. I do not believe that we are required to teach, as a doctrine of the Church, that the earth was created some thousands of years ago, in a sequence of six days aptly described by the opening chapter of Genesis. This is not because Genesis 1 is poetic in nature, nor because these elements of the Genesis narrative are clearly culturally determined. Rather, these claims about creation cannot be counted as doctrines of the Church because they are not *germane to the gospel*. If we were to claim them as authoritative Christian teachings – as matters of doctrine – then we would have to regard them as authoritative Christian teaching *in addition* to the gospel. We would have to say, in our catechesis, 'Do you believe that, in Jesus, God was reconciling the world to Godself – and do you also believe this other thing: that the earth was created in six days some thousands of years ago?' By contrast, to say 'I believe in God . . . creator of heaven and earth' is a doctrine of the Church, because it has been shown to be part of what we need to say if we want to say 'Jesus is Lord' with full seriousness, in the light of Scripture. Jesus is Lord of all the earth, because the earth is his; redemption in Christ is the fulfilment of our creaturely natures because we were made in, through and for him.

Similarly, therefore, in the Church's debates about marriage, the key question in determining the proper limits of our explorations is, 'What is germane to the gospel in what our faith says about gender?' What do we need to say about this topic in order to go on saying 'Jesus is Lord'? I have suggested that our explorations can and should take us beyond complementarian accounts of gender, because I can't currently see that those accounts could be anything other than additions to the gospel, were we take them to be authoritative Christian teachings. That is, if they were to be held out as authoritative for Christians it could only be because we said, in our catechesis, 'You must believe that, in Jesus, God was reconciling the world to Godself – and you must also believe this other thing: that men and women have essentially complementary ways of being.' If that is true, then we cannot and must not regard complementarianism as a matter of doctrine.

Conclusion

The Church of England's debates about marriage (and the debates of other churches too, perhaps) are deeply bound up with patterns of thinking about gender.

They are bound up with questions about the proper responsiveness of our habits of thought, speech, and action to our embodied sexual differentiation, and about what the good news of redemption in Christ demands of us in this area.

In our debates, questions have been raised forcefully and insistently about an existing answer – the complementarian answer – and defences no less forceful and insistent given. Yet however pervasive that answer is and has been, however deep its roots, however much its supporters can appeal to Scripture and tradition in its defence, it cannot properly be claimed as a necessary teaching of the Church if we have not determined that it is *required* of us by the nature of redemption. That is, now that weighty onslaughts have been launched against it, it can only properly stand as an authoritative limit upon the acceptable exploration and development of our accounts and practices of gender if it can be made clear that to deny it would be to deny the good news of God’s gracious love for the world in Jesus Christ.

We are called, as I said above, to the intense and demanding work of discovering together the particular possibilities of godly growth and transformation open to us, the particular ways in which we can be conformed by the Spirit to Christ to become icons of God’s love, as the particular sexually differentiated bodies that we are. Our debates about marriage are, at least in part, debates about what accounts of gender are demanded of us, or permitted to us, in the context of serious commitment to this task.

Despite the length and volume of the arguments about marriage and sexuality in my Church, these questions, about the demands of Christian holiness in the realm of gender, are ones that demand much more intensive attention and debate. We may have been arguing about sexuality and gender for ages, but our arguments still have much deeper to go.

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