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Desire and Grace:

Williams and the Search for Bodily Wholeness

In his 1989 address to the UK's Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, Rowan Williams outlines how sexual expression needs to be understood as an experience of "the body's grace," and as a discovery of that grace.[1] This evocative turn of phrase is meant to connote two distinctive Christian themes.

First, sexual expression is an act of grace at its core. It is only in mutual self-giving, rather than in individualistic sexual fantasy or pleasure- or power-seeking, that we discover sex at its most human and most meaningful. The grace consists in the way we may allow ourselves to be seen as desirable in the eyes of another. When we give ourselves to that desire, we in turn rediscover ourselves as desirable. This "recreation" (p. 314) of ourselves through the eyes of another "parallels," we might say, the central experience

1. Williams, *The Body's Grace* (London: Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, 2002). Reprinted in Charles C. Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls, and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1996) 58–68, and in Eugene F. Rogers, ed. *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 309–21. Page references in the main text are to Williams' essay and will follow the Rogers edition.

The Rogers and Hefling versions are identical. The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) version is identical to an online version (http://www.igreens.org.uk/bodys_grace.htm, accessed 4 February 2008). But the LGCM/online text differs from the Rogers/Hefling text. In view of the accessibility of the LGCM/online version, I will note where these differences seem significant.

of the Christian gospel: that we have been desired by God, whatever else we may think of ourselves. ("Parallels" is too weak a way to summarize what Williams thinks happens. The best sex instantiates, recalls, and reflects divine grace, and although the term "sacrament" is never bought into play, the concept may hover in the periphery.)

Second, this grace is embodied. It is not an idea, a mental construct or a future state. It is in the melding together of self-giving, desire, and bodily awareness that we "come to ourselves" (to paraphrase Sarah Layton's experience, p. 311), finding both our creation and redemption enacted in the present.

Not all sex is like this, to be sure—far from it. In offering us a theological appraisal of sex, Williams also offers a diagnostic for sex at its worst. He is quick to point out the many ways in which sex falls terribly or drearily short of the bodily expression of grace. Not least of these are moments in or versions of marriage, which is not in its own right a guarantee of embodied grace. On Williams' account, sex is risky and precarious, for there is no legal or conventional or normed way to ensure the experience of grace.

If the best sex is constituted in bodily grace, a surprising outcome follows. Homosexual sex, which cannot be justified as instrumental to the population of the world, may instantiate embodied grace most clearly. Same-sex love "brings us up against the possibility ... of non-functional joy; or, to put it less starkly, joy whose material 'production' is an embodied person aware of grace" (p. 318). In turn we discover the possibility of a Creator whose exuberance creates us for joy.

In such reflections, Williams is seeking to discern the "inner logic and process of the sexual relation itself" (p. 318). That is, he is seeking to discern the existential meaning of sexual expression—how we are to construe such experiences as humans and as subjects. By contrast, conservative appeals to nature, gender complementarity or the authority of Scripture do not necessarily explore the "inner logic" of sex, and so fail to render their own sexual ethic subjectively intelligible. (Proponents of these views could equally argue that a full account of sexuality's subjective inner logic is inaccessible to us, but generally they do not.) As a result, these appeals can seem facile, unable to explain how and why even married heterosexual sex fails to live up to its promise, and why so many married couples find themselves in situations where sexuality figures centrally in their reports of confusion and pain.

It is hard not to long for Williams' vision of the possibilities of sexual experience. The central advantage of his approach is not even that he interprets and articulates these possibilities in an existentially satisfying way. It is that he comprehends our sexual aspect in reference to the gracious love of the Godhead as revealed in Christ.

At the same time, he outlines what makes our sexual desire and its expression risky, leaving us vulnerable and opening us to embarrassment and disappointment. In doing so he suggests that much conventional sexual ethics is an attempt to control and minimize this risk, effectively banishing from our presence a means for discovering the nature of grace.

In this response, I want to join with Williams to discover whatever is discoverable about the inner logic of sexual relations. I will mainly confine my attention to *The Body's Grace*, even though Williams has recently distanced himself a little from it.[2] In his subsequent role as Archbishop of Canterbury, he has made other statements about marriage and sexuality. But the conceptual terrain laid out in 1989 deserves attention on its own terms. I take the liberty of this close engagement on the grounds that Archbishop Williams has not formally resiled from Professor Williams' arguments; and even if he had, they retain some force.

I make no attempt to hide my theological and social conservatism, and so will engage with the essay on that basis. But I will not recount what conservatives do and say at their best. Rather, I hope to outline what conservatives aspire to do, and to concede where Williams' account corrects us at our worst. In turn I hope he will receive some suggestions about what may be defects in his account. I will argue as follows:

1. A Christian sexual ethic fails badly when it ignores Williams' central insight that the gracious recognition and reception of embodied desire is necessary to good sexual expression.
2. Conservatives who appeal to "biblical authority" think that human "essence" or identity is not necessarily easily accessible, self-evident or obvious, and that the Bible discloses unanticipated aspects of human being

2. "Twenty years ago I wrote an essay in which I advocated a different direction. That was when I was still a professor, to stimulate debate. It did not generate much support and a lot of criticism—quite fairly on a number of points." He does not enumerate the points on which he believes he was fairly criticized. Wim Houtman, " 'The Church is not inclusive': an interview with Archbishop Rowan Williams," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 19 August, 2006, http://www.nd.nl/htm/dossier/seksualiteit/artikelen/060819eb.htm.

and human possibility. Concepts such as "nature," "gender complementarily," procreative potential, and lifelong faithfulness arise *a posteriori* from a heuristic process of reading. We are thereby inducted into how we may humbly receive these other gifts of embodiment.

3. A thin account of celibacy is a common conservative aporia. Williams partially redresses it, but does not recognize that a full account of celibacy also requires an expansive vision of community friendships. If we fail to recognize the role of community friendships, it seems difficult to expect that it will be the norm for celibates to live alongside married couples in the Christian community. But once the role of these relationships is recognized, this norm is far more satisfying.
4. Williams' account may not completely avoid "sexual essentialism," which may in turn trade upon a more subtle "emotional essentialism." Evangelical moral theology need not presume either essentialism (although in practice, conservative communities do inculcate some very problematic essentialisms).
5. Some provisional observations about the Anglican Communion's current vexed situation are offered. I also observe the relevance of my argument to two recent comments by the Archbishop.

Whether or not I persuade anyone to a conservative view is less important on this occasion than the more modest task of indicating how a conservative sexual ethic can be plausible, livable, and indeed satisfying. If I achieve this goal, I hope to have assisted in the ongoing difficult discussion between Christians.[3]

3. Although all the cracks in the edifice are entirely my own, I want to acknowledge my debts to Michael Banner, Michael Hill, Stanley Hauerwas, and Oliver O'Donovan. I will not labor the point by continually referencing their ideas, but interested readers might consult: Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 252–68; Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2002); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001) 481–504, and in Rogers, ed. *Theology and sexuality*, 289–305; and Oliver M. T. O'Donovan, *Good News for Gay Christians* (online: http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070108odonovan7.cfm?doc=179.

The Central Insight

Williams' essay makes use of the Paul Scott character Sarah Layton, a generous but lonely woman whose cynically manipulated seduction results in an aborted pregnancy and further pain. Yet in and after this sexual experience, "she had entered into her body's grace" (p. 311, citing Scott). Conservative responses have taken exception to Williams' appeal to this narrative in the development of his argument.

The usual response is to express puzzlement or disapproval that Williams has not proceeded according to biblical foundationalism, which begins (and may even end) with an interpretation of sexuality based on Genesis 1–2. To a conservative reader, Williams' approach seems at worst pretentious, and at best an idiosyncratic artifact of his sensibility as a poet and sensitive reader.

Conservatives, however, need to hear the contribution this narrative makes to Williams' account of sexual expression. By using the well-drawn character of Sarah, who is almost a worst-case example of consensual sexual involvement, Williams proceeds to explain why our moments of sexual expression, or our yearnings for them, may be accompanied by an inarticulate sense that much more is at stake than merely the presence or absence of pleasure. Since his explanation does look to the Godhead, he can claim that "much public Christian comment on these matters is not only non-theological but positively anti-theological" and "an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts" (p. 320). That is, a biblical foundationalist deontology seems incapable of making sexuality intelligible either in terms of our experience or in the light of our relationship to God.

These opponents surely also fail to consider the occasion of Williams' original address. He recounts Sarah's presence without belonging expressed in her joyless detachment from community and family. There is an "appalling" mother, and half-formed connections and lost opportunities with older women whose self-identities are similarly adrift. We also meet Paul Scott's Ronald Merrick, a man whose abhorrence at his homosexual yearnings begins the eventual erosion of his soul. What must it have meant for some of those first listeners to hear a theologian recognize their experience of years or decades of silence, estrangement, longing or self-loathing? By approaching these experiences obliquely and through the artifice of particular stories, and by asking the opening question "Why does sex matter?"

(p. 310), Williams brings hope that sexual experiences do not have to be yet more of the same and may even point to the divine grace for which all humanity longs. Abstract arguments would not inspire much hope in such a company, and would not offer much evidence that their authors have tried to notice those hidden inner worlds that a gay and lesbian community would know.

Williams' central insight is to discern (with the help of Thomas Nagel) the way the "humanity" of our sexual involvements consists in a reciprocity of desire. When our sexual arousal and desire is gratefully received by another, and their reciprocal desire springs forth to be received by our self, the cascade of giving and receiving is the culmination of my embodied self entering "into the shared world of language and (in the widest sense!) 'intercourse' " (p. 312). The awful risk that we all know so well from adolescence and beyond is that our desire will not be received, and neither it nor by extension our self will be received as pleasing. But when all goes well, the excellence of sex lies not primarily in its physical pleasure but in the joy of this interpersonal meeting.

> For my body to be the cause of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable. To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body . . . We are pleased because we are pleasing. (p. 313)

To think of this experience in terms of grace requires the grammar of theology and its account of grace. Why does sex matter so much to us? Why does it often seem much more important than a mere exercise in pleasure? Williams is to be applauded for his attempt to decode for us what we find hard to understand about ourselves, by locating sexual expression within the horizon of divine grace.

He identifies Scriptural attestations of his argument both in the revolutionary mutuality of 1 Corinthians 7:4, and in the way several biblical authors use marital imagery for divine grace. We may go further and observe how these authors even situate human marriage as chronologically and ontologically subsequent to relationship between God, or God in Christ, and his people (Hos 3:1 and *passim*; Eph 5:23–33; Rev 19:7–8, 31:2).

The incredibly audacious Isaiah 62:5, where "as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice in you," is an extraordinary image of hot desire that both classical theism and modern conservatism would baulk at. Human marriage is a parable and an enactment of the joyful, ardent, and inexplicably prodigious love of God. In this connection we might also remember the long tradition of reading *The Song of Solomon* as a parable for Christ's desire and love of his people, a tradition that does not require readers to be distracted from their own bodily desires!

Williams reserves his harshest words for those versions of marriage that take no account or make a mockery of this "process and relation" of sexuality. We may well accuse the young professor of some rather heavy-handed invective against marriage. Nevertheless, the Christian pastor or theologian can only repudiate with him those reductive accounts that allow marriage and marital sex to wither into the forms he describes. Conventional heterosexual morality "simply absolves us from the difficulties we might meet" in finding grace in sexual activity "because all we need to know is that sexual activity is licensed in one context and in no other" (p. 314). Marriage serves to distance us from "the embarrassment and insecurity of desire," because procreation is "a good cause that can be visibly and plainly evaluated in its usefulness and success" (p. 318). The grace of sexuality has simply become "fenced with conditions" (p. 312). In the worst cases "in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is a 'perversion' " (p. 313) because of imbalances and asymmetries in its sexual politics and processes. "[T]he facts of the situation are that an enormous number of 'sanctioned' unions are a framework for violence and human destructiveness on a disturbing scale; sexual union is not delivered from moral danger and ambiguity by satisfying a formal socioreligious criterion" (p. 316).[4]

4. The picture is even bleaker in the essay's LGCM/online form, a divergence that may fuel misunderstandings. A paragraph in the LGCM/online version is not in the Rogers/Hefling text: "The worst thing we can do with the notion of sexual fidelity, though, is to 'legalise' it in such a way that it stands quite apart from the ventures and dangers of growth and is simply a public bond, enforceable by religious sanctions." LGCM, 7.

On the blessing of sexual unions, a sentence in the LGCM/online version is significantly softened in the Rogers/Hefling text. LGCM/online: "If this blessing becomes a curse or an empty formality, it is both wicked and useless to hold up the sexuality of the canonically married heterosexual as absolute, exclusive and ideal." LGCM, 7.

Rogers/Hefling: "We should not do it in order to create a wholly impersonal and enforceable 'bond'; if we do, we risk turning blessing into curse, grace into law, art into rule-keeping." (Rogers, 315).

There can be no doubt that Williams is correct. Marriages regularly and tragically fail in all these ways, and Williams lays bare a core aspect of sexuality that needs to be heard, spoken, and lived. Conservative sexual ethics is not devoid of such themes, as when my mentor in ethics wrote that sexual intercourse "is an act which should incorporate and symbolize the giving of the self, and the reception of the other."[5] Yet where conservative communities fail to envision such mutual grace, their pulpits extend mere deontology while their members quietly react as Williams predicts. "It doesn't matter what I do (say) with my body, because it's my inner life and emotions that matter" (p. 314). Here we could imagine the woman who consigns herself to sex as a duty and takes refuge in her fantasies for satisfaction. "The only criterion is what gives pleasure and does no damage" (p. 314). Here we could imagine the man who primes himself with porn so that the marital bed becomes a mental movie set starring himself. Under these conditions neither can find the true presence of the other. Without news of grace, there is little option for change.

Marriage: What Conservatives Aspire to Discern

We have seen the way Professor Williams perceived conservative views on sex and marriage. They are anti-theological and abstract because they defer to constructions extraneous to theology, such as gender complementarity and natural law, and so are prone to ad hoc uses of the Bible. Hence they cannot ascertain the true meaning of sex. But what do conservatives aspire to achieve in the deployment of these stratagems?

I will begin to answer this question by way of Williams' qualified use of biblical texts. The imagery of Hosea 3:1 (p. 319) "remains strongly patriarchal, not surprisingly, but" goes on to highlight a logic of sexuality as "process and relation." "Ephesians 5, for all its blatant assumption of male authority, still insists on the relational and personally creative element . . ." (p. 319). In a milieu suspicious of the value of these texts, these concessions to modern sensibilities about gender relations are an attempt to rehabilitate the texts for use in a sexual ethic "seriously informed by our Bible" (p. 319).

The concessions assume that we now possess a settled account of gender relations that the biblical authors have flouted, whatever other mer-

5. Hill, *How and Why*, 152.

its the texts may have. In contrast, a practice of biblical authority assumes that no account of gender relations is finally settled, and that these strange and confronting ancient Scriptures offer to every society something more that may be discerned about its gender relations.

My point is not simply that Williams' handling of the Bible fails to accord with my community's accepted hermeneutical practice. Rather, I wish to make the more substantive argument that his approach to the Bible might inadvertently deprive us of new and real insights into human being and social possibilities. I will illustrate the how this might occur by means of a digression into the discussion of gender relations.

A practice of "biblical authority" attempts to read biblical texts in a way that might disclose something unexpected and unanticipated about human being. By avoiding the presumption that the texts are conventionally "patriarchal," we are freed to discover what these initially alien and confronting passages may offer. In this case, what insight might they include about men? What if, beyond a deontological prescription of how men and women should relate, something can be learnt about male power?

Male power is "inalienable" in the sense that men cannot be abstracted from the power of their bodies. This power gives men their socially influential capacities, which too often take the form of callous brutality. These claims can be inferred from Ephesians 5, which implicitly acknowledges the existence of inalienable male social power by offering a better way to enact it ("husbands, love your wives" etc., v.25f).

Reading this passage heuristically alongside other biblical passages further discloses that inalienable social power may not be construed with Aristotle or Nietzsche as a "natural" license to dominate. In Christian thought, inalienable social power exists to serves the good of another, especially the vulnerable (cf. Mark 10:42–44, Eph 5:25, and 1 Pet 3:7). Our enquiry would also discover elsewhere in the Bible testimonies to equity between the genders, which may even have subverted their ancient contexts.

Perhaps it is their very philosophical naivety that enables biblical authors to begin to imagine the proper enaction of male power. For they bypass any attempt to describe an *esse* of men or of their power, preferring instead to imagine it enacted in love and service. Nor are "love" and "service" an over-specified description of how power may be used: a virtuous "field of operations" is established. The actual behaviors of a particular man are matters of knowledge, discernment, and freedom.

Of course, Marxism, feminism, and postmodernism have taught us to suspect that abuses of power simply take cover under the term "service." These modes of critique helpfully alert us to the false universalisms of Enlightenment rationality, but in a milieu dominated by these forms of critique, our enquiry can become bogged down in an infinite regress of suspicion. And such a regress takes us no closer to learning how we may *gladly* receive the inalienable social power of men.

In contrast, a sympathetic, inferential, and heuristic reading of the Bible has begun to give us a view of men not easily attained in our current milieu. Men are so imbued with inalienable social power that it never departs our life together, and never will for as long as there are men. Yet male power eludes a definitive specification of either its *esse* or its proper enaction. Nonetheless, we discover something about how we may gladly receive this power as the biblical authors envision it enacted virtuously, in love and service. We have not discovered a male "essence" or identity; but we have discovered a "field of operations" that seems true to reality, and elicits joyful exploration and experimentation in partnership with women. Human being and possibilities have opened up before us by our remaining open to the strangeness of these texts.

In this cameo of a different discussion, I hope to have provided some sense of how a practice of "biblical authority" consists in the search for a nexus to what at first we cannot see, but which gradually becomes recognizable and then livable. It looks for holistic tuition about the complexity of reality by remaining open to all the complexities of the Bible (and uses the Bible's deontological command set only a first heuristic step on the long journey of wisdom). This practice supposes that the best self-awareness or God-awareness does not finally come from the analysis and articulation of our experiences. Rather, our awareness is opened to divine interrogation and guidance such as is on view, for example, in the Torah-molded prayer and reflection of Psalm 139. Similarly then, a practice of biblical authority seeks to discern whatever is not necessarily obvious about our sexual aspect.

Williams returns the mutuality of grace to centre-stage in a Christian sexual ethic, but four other concepts emphasized in the traditional account are also moved to the periphery. These are "nature," "gender complementarity," procreative potential, and lifelong faithfulness. It is beyond my scope to establish these concepts for those who do not accept their relevance. But I do hope to show why Christians who still hold to them have a plausible

case. I will also suggest that the Bible offers no *esse* for these four aspects of sex, but that a practice of biblical authority inducts us in how to humbly receive them as gifts of our embodiment.

Nature. In Williams' final approving quotation of Susan Griffin, the entire discussion has been about "perception wedded to matter itself, a knowledge that comes to us from the sense of the body" and that does not deny "the power of fate and nature" (p. 320). "Nature" here means material embodiment, which cannot be effaced and whose experiences deserve a meaningful account.

To find this meaningful account, Williams directs our attention to the way embodied desire brings persons into relation. This mode of being shares some commonality with the *uncreated* relations conducted by the Triune persons, because embodied human desire is analogous to divine grace. Here is why Williams regards his approach as a properly "theological" investigation into the true character of sexual expression.

It is an approach that excludes crass appeals to "nature" as a form of law. But it also seems to imply that no other aspect of human sexual "nature" is theologically relevant if no analogy to the Godhead is evident. This implication requires further defense, if only because the sexual activities he regards as illicit (rape, pedophilia, and bestiality, p. 313) do seem to require some further account than his approach offers.

Williams submits that these activities are wrong because one party controls another without regard for the desire of another. They therefore violate the divine typology of proper human sexuality. This insight is significant, but two observations need to be made. First, by putting the fault in terms of "control," Williams implicitly acknowledges a "natural" category of embodiment—namely the power(s) of the abuser and the power differential between abuser and abused. It seems arbitrary to deny the relevance for a sexual ethic of any other aspects of our embodiment.

Second, some abusers do claim that their victims expressed desire. In such cases, Williams' diagnosis forces us to the unsafe assertion that these reports are always only ever deluded, unless we also concede that the presence or absence of desire is not the sole criterion of our judgments. It then becomes proper to wonder what other aspects of our embodiment may be at work.

"Gender complementarity," procreative potential, and lifelong faithfulness offer themselves as possible candidates in a constellation of purposes for sex that bestow meaning upon it and so also describe its "nature."

Gender complementarity. But in the heuristic habit of biblical authority described above, any "theory of natural complementarity" (p. 320) can only arise *a posteriori* from the sustained reading of Scripture. Williams does not address the cumulative impact of the biblical material, where metaphors for divine desire and celebrations of sexual activity all regularly involve husbands and wives.

In the same way that hints about male power may easily be lost, so also hints about our sexual "nature" are lost if these texts are discounted as conventionally heterosexist. When we ask how we are to receive our embodiment as *gendered* people, the cumulative impact of texts from Genesis 1:26–27 onward suggests that we are to "complement" one another. Of course it is certainly true that our gendered-ness is not always expressed in terms of sexual intercourse (just as it is true that sexual intercourse does not always result in childbirth), so the *esse* of this complementarity also finally eludes us. Therefore "gender complementarity" is not a concept simply "applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures" (p. 320). When Christian sexual ethics holds that Scripture inducts us into the appropriation of our gender, it thereby explores how this other proper aspect of the body may be humbly received as a gift in all our acquaintances, and especially as it pertains to our most intimate relationships.

Procreative potential. How are we to do justice to the fact that our gendered embodiment is also potentially procreative? Christian sexual ethics must explore how these inalienable aspects of our bodily existence may be humbly received as gifts. An exploration that remains open to all the data of Scripture also looks for the way Scriptural texts induct us into the appropriation of our capacity for procreation.

Williams is correct to observe that the biblical presentation of marriage is not contingent upon procreation. The embodied grace of sexuality is indeed very good news for couples who grieve over infertility. However, that our church "accepts the legitimacy of contraception" (p. 320) is scant warrant by which to assert that the procreative capacity of marriage is an irrelevance.

This argument only discloses that a technological and social development has served to abstract sex from its traditional moorings in a set of human purposes for sex. The openness of marriage to children has been relegated from a central marital purpose to an optional accessory. Hence same sex unions have been able to commend themselves as an equivalently relationship because equivalently companionable. But none of these cultural developments necessarily take us any closer to a theologically informed sexual ethic.

A similar churchly logic might also accommodate the church to high divorce rates, and then proceed to deduce that "lifelong" faithfulness is an obsolete artifact of our short-lived ancestors. But is a Christian ethic really so beholden to advances in medical technology? The Archbishop clearly denies that "advances" in the technology of mass destruction should direct a Christian ethic of war.[6] Liberal and conservative Christian lassitude in this arena, and its dissonance with the vocation of the Body, is plainly exposed by Williams' position. The two arenas (war and sex) may seem incommensurable, but every arena entails a journey of discernment.

To discern that our procreative capacity may be gladly received within the "weave" of gender and sexual relations is not problematic, and should clearly inform a Christian sexual ethic in some way since it is not an unimportant aspect of the body. Indeed, in response to the appearance of contraception and the opportunity it presents for adult-centered lifestyles, we may prefer to insist that God calls married people to marriages that are gratefully open to welcoming children. (This "welcome" would also require a theological exposition, since it may be expressed not only in fertility, but also in adoption, or in hospitality, or in many other forms of interest and care.)

The logic of procreative capacity only becomes problematic when stripped of the other elements in the "weave" (as when it becomes the sole or main justification of marriage). It is equally odd to discount procreative capacity as offering nothing to the discussion about sex.

Lifelong faithfulness. The biblical portrayal of lifelong faithfulness also inducts us into the "process and relation" of mutual sexual grace. Williams discusses how the *time* needed to discover mutual sexual grace is promoted

6. Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 9–11; cf. Williams, "The Health of the Spirit," in *Public Life and the Place of the Church: Reflections to Honour the Bishop of Oxford*, ed. Michael W. Brierley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 218–20.

by "unconditional," "perilous," "demanding," and "promising" public sexual unions (p. 315). But in returning to the story of Sarah Layton he asserts that liaisons outside of such unions may also result in the discovery of grace. An unfortunate caricature then follows: "an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership must conform to the pattern of commitment or else have the nature of sin *and nothing else* is unreal and silly" (pp 315-16).

His italicized phrase is odd, for no conservative in any Augustinian tradition would seriously claim that non-married sex is entirely drained of its created good. Rather, and as Sarah's story eloquently testifies, non-married sex does not set the conditions under which our sexual nature can find its best fulfillment. It is precisely the exploitative tendency of sex without promise that compromises the discovery of grace. The poignancy of Sarah's character after her sexual encounter and once she is alone again consists, as much as anything, in what has now been lost; and people like her report that they were "used," the antithesis of any ongoing experience of grace. Williams is right to recognize here "the facts of a lot of people's histories" (p. 316), but his recognition seems fatalistic, as if we might not hope for future Sarahs to know "the body's grace" in the best possible way. Again, the validation of the body's grace makes a central aspect of sex peripheral, and so he neglects also to consider how the logic of adultery *undoes* the logic of grace.

If this comment is read as an attempt to bring safety and peace and to flee vulnerability and risk, it is hard to see where the problem lies if at the same time we have conceded—and even now defend the view—that "the body's grace" is an essential aspect of sex. Certainly no modern Archbishop would condone Sarah's seducer simply because his acts led her to glimpse the body's grace. The public "licenses" and "sanctions" of lifelong faithful marriage, for all the use of legal terms, are attempts at a kind of social clarity that brings safety to couples and to the communities that surround them. These "licenses" and "sanctions" can be inhabited with kindness, repentance, forgiveness, and joyful gladness; and to do so avoids great pain (especially for children).

The vulnerabilities, tragedies, and sexual misconnections to which Williams persistently refers can and do find some healing in lifelong faithfulness. This inference from biblical attestation, and its commendation among conservative communities, is simply the articulation of something about our sexual nature that cannot be sampled before being lived. This is

an "ideal," to be sure, but hardly an unreal or silly one. Enough of humanity lives and tastes the "ideal" to make it at least plausible.

I hope to have shown the way a practice of "biblical authority" infers several interwoven themes to discern what is never entirely accessible or obvious about human sexual "nature." The four aspects I have briefly addressed, when interwoven with "the body's grace," become that complex called "marriage"—itself an elucidation of the meaning and purpose of sex.

Our cultural milieu can render us blind and ungrateful to good gifts embedded in a good created order. Scripture presumes the existence of a real moral order, but one that finally needs divine interpretation for its meaning and purposes and for the ways we may properly receive that order and enact its meaning and purpose. (We owe most of these thoughts, of course, to Augustine's pioneering lifelong journey through Scripture.)

Our "natures" are to be received under divine tutelage without us ever entirely knowing our *esse*. Such is the journey of Christian discipleship. If the project seems at times to be abstracted from our daily episodes of sexual thought, emotion, and experience, Williams also knows that his own account is similarly threatened by "abstractness and overambitious theory" (p. 312), which is the price we all pay when we try to articulate something important and irreducibly complex.

Celibacy: Another Conservative Aporia

A community's journey includes married men and women, but the journey also consists in their partnership with sexually chaste unmarried people. We should therefore examine Williams' treatment of celibacy.

If the first aporia of a conservative sexual ethic is to miss the divine symbolism of sexual intimacy, its second is the theologically thin account of celibacy often found within Protestant and Reformed sexual ethics. I will not rehearse the once-useful Reformed complaint that a "vocation of celibacy" entails an illicit proscription against marriage, for that objection would obscure the central features of celibacy that Williams helpfully observes. It is an estate not devoid of sexual desire and desiring, but where the desiring love of God may receive special attention. But is it helpful to characterize celibates as those who "see if they can find themselves, their bodily selves, in a life dependent simply upon trust in the generous delight of God" (p. 317)?

It is tempting to retort that the married are also "dependent simply upon trust in the generous delight of God." However in his defense, it must be said that Williams' distinction does resemble that made by the apostle Paul (1 Cor 7:32–33), who contrasts the divine opportunities afforded by "un-marriage" against daily practical problems posed by marriage; and Paul also knows of the special sense in which marriage instantiates the love of God in Christ. Williams rightly draws our attention, then, to the way each vocation—celibacy and marriage—has its own way of enacting the desirous love of God.

But to describe the celibate as "dependent simply" upon God individualistically exaggerates his or her engagement with God. Such an image of the celibate resonates with modern constructions of "the single" as a loner. It therefore becomes difficult for modern "singles" seriously to hear calls to sexual chastity, because they assume that desire by God and for God is being offered as the incorporeal solution to their bodily desires, and as a cure for their sense of social disenfranchisement. To present the Christian life as consisting in the estate of either celibacy or marriage therefore seems bizarrely constrictive and unreal. Hence Williams concludes that some good sex may be had beyond marriage, and that celibacy is really an option only for the few.

But in these construals of celibacy, the mistake has been to miss the power of embodied grace in expansive networks of sexually chaste but intimate friendships. As Aelred of Rievaulx once put it,[7] friendships also require faithfulness (III.88-90) and thrive upon love, affection, security, and delight:

> Friendship involves love when there is a show of favor that proceeds from benevolence. It involves affection when a certain inner pleasure comes from friendship. It involves security when it leads to a revelation of all one's secrets and purposes without fear or suspicion. It involves delight when there is a certain meeting of the minds—an agreement that is pleasant and benevolent—concerning all matters, whether happy or sad, which have a bearing on the friendship . . . (III.51)

Williams has sought "what sexuality might mean at its most *comprehensive*," and how sexual activity might communicate and display "a breadth

7. Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mark F. Williams, (London: Associated University Presses, 1994).

of human possibility and a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of others" (p. 313). But the account is not in fact comprehensive, because it does not signal the many ways in which the body may heal and enlarge the life of others *through friendship*. His "failure" has been a heroic one though, for he almost-but-not-quite effectively confronts Protestant and Reformed boredom or suspicion or pity toward the chastely unmarried.

The concept of two estates, celibate and married, is made intelligible in the New Testament by a logic of "brothers and sisters" in Christ, who look forward to an eschatological experience where *all* participate as "bride" (Eph 5:23; Rev 18:7–8, 21:2). This mind-bending vision of a united collective known and desired by God accounts for Jesus' extraordinary and counter-intuitive declaration of the cessation of human marriage (Mark 12:25; Matt 22:30; Luke 20:35). Yet John's heavenly vision (Rev 7:9) is also of a collective whose members have not lost their individual histories and identities. It is as if all are celibate, yet all are married to the Lamb, and intimate with each other through intimacy with him.

The celibate therefore instantiates our truest identity as people who are not finally enclosed or defined by our current temporary associations. She and he do this well when each embodies the grace of care, hospitality, and concern toward people in networks that cannot be contained by any conventional identity marker. He and she do this well when bonds of affection to the many are not distorted by those bonds that sexual expression would bring with the few. They do this well when they model for us what it is to dwell with each other, not merely as a collection of some lonely people alongside other equally lonely couples, but as a truly intimate community.

As Augustine once rhetorically put it, "what pertains more closely to a body than its sex?"[8] No sane Christian could deny what we expansively call our "sexuality," which irrespective of our marital state is a constitutive element of our embodiment. But it does not follow that "sexuality" must necessarily be erotically expressed in order that we be human and whole. We are already "bodily whole" with our "sexuality" present in our embodiment as gendered, and whether or not we enact erotic love.

A much more expansive logic and practice of Christian friendship (perhaps even with some exploration of whether "gender complementarity"

8. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 195 (V.7). Augustine directed this comment against ancient misogynists, in defence of the good of womanhood.

is a meaningful concept in this sphere) would free us all to see how celibacy is as honorable an estate as marriage. It is equally plausible, it is authentically livable, and it is bodily whole.

Two Essentialisms

Of course Aelred has been adopted by some as a gay patron saint. On this reading, the intimacy on view in his *Spiritual Friendship* must be gay, just as self-evidently as I have used his work to help imagine networks inhabited by the chastely non-married. These different readings of Aelred reflect an impasse about anthropology. The gay reading succeeds on an assumption of sexual essentialism. (Sexual essentialism is at least the view that sexual thoughts, feelings, and attractions are necessarily central to true descriptions of human identity. At most it entails that erotic intimacy or sexual ecstasy is the pinnacle of human and relational authenticity.)

But if a human essence is not so easily available to us, the absence of any overt sexuality in *Spiritual Friendship* enables us, with much of the Christian tradition, to heuristically imagine our way into a new and unanticipated identity "in Christ." Such an approach simply recognizes what the ancients always said: that we never know ourselves as well as we think we do. In Christian thought, we are finally "known by God" (1 Cor 8:3) and in Christ we "put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator" (Col 3:10, NJB).

Is there also a sexual essentialism in Williams' essay? He signals that he is aware of the essentialist pitfall when he acknowledges that there is "something frightening and damaging about the kind of sexual mutuality on which everything comes to depend."[9] For Williams, sexuality *is* central to an understanding of the human condition insofar as thinking about sexuality leads us "into the knowledge that our identity is being made in the relations of bodies, not by the private exercise of will or fantasy: we belong with and to each other, not to our 'private' selves" (p. 317). This conclusion suggests that our personal identity is to be understood *relationally*, but it need not be taken to imply that personal identity is reducible to sexual identity.

9. The quoted text only appears in the LGCM/online version of the essay (LGCM, 9).

However, it is unclear why Williams' point could not also be illustrated by the embodied practices of *the church*. The mutual grace embodied in the best of married sex are also differently embodied in myriad other practices, moments, and spiritual gifts. Yet the tenor of the essay is to equate our identity with the *sexual* relations of our bodies rather than with their ecclesial relations.

For it is one thing to ask Williams' opening question "Why does sex matter?" into the air, as it were. It is quite another to open with it in a group that has already constituted itself on grounds of sexual identity. Within such a fellowship, the way in which "sex matters" is forced to bear more freight than it is able. Sex also matters in those fellowships where grace is envisioned within networks of sexually chaste and caring friendship, but it matters alongside a very great number of other important matters. I fear then that Williams may have done his hearers a disservice if, by addressing their central question in his opening question, he renders incomprehensible for them those ways of living that are joyful, contented, aware of sexual desire, but entirely free not to express it without any fear of losing identity or wholeness.

If I may digress, I cannot help wondering if our cultural tendencies to sexual essentialism derive from another more subtle essentialism—an "emotional essentialism," where what I feel is who I am. Here I borrow and extend Diane Tice's concept of "mood purism," the view that "emotions are 'natural' and should be experienced just as they present themselves."[10] It is beyond our scope to challenge this essentialism here, but elsewhere I have begun the task of understanding, with Augustine, the way our (good) emotions can fixate upon (good) elements in an ordered moral field and thus become distorted. After divine forgiveness for these distortions and whatever behaviors have followed, our new vocation in Christ includes the reordering of our moral and emotional apprehension through the adventitious power of the Spirit, who elicits our joyful participation in such a project.[11]

10. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than I.Q.* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) 58, citing Tice.

11. Andrew Cameron, "Augustine on Obsession," in *The Consolations of Theology*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); idem, "Augustine on Lust," in *Still Deadly: Ancient Cures for the Seven Sins*, ed. Andrew Cameron and Brian S. Rosner (Sydney South: Aquila, 2007); idem, "How to Say YES to the World: Towards a New Way Forward in Evangelical Social Ethics," *Reformed Theological Review* 66.1 (2007).

Of course neither essentialism is limited to gay people. Both are very prevalent in modern life, within the church and beyond it. (Perhaps homosexual life and thought is a simply a consistent articulation and expression of these essentialisms, if I may say so with no pejorative intent.)

Elsewhere, the Archbishop effectively counsels against all of our essentialist tendencies when he argues against thinking of the self "as a finished and self-contained reality, with its own fixed needs and dispositions."[12] Modern life is not limited to sexual and emotional essentialism. The various identity labels we presume to bestow always threaten to eclipse our truest vocation "in Christ."

This theological criticism of essentialism should equally be directed to those who primarily define themselves by any ideology. Sadly, conservative churches are also riddled with those false essentialisms that form the horizons within which we habitually define ourselves. Our nation, our occupation, our "family values," our passions, our preoccupations, our educational achievements, our domicile, and our familial connections all constitute some aspect of who we are—but "I consider them rubbish," said St Paul, "that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). We are each called into this new identity "in Christ," and what we may discover about ourselves on this journey cannot neatly be described in advance. If it could, it would no longer be Jesus that we are following.

Twenty Years On

It is well beyond my competence to comment upon the Archbishop's recent role as mediator within the Communion over matters of human sexuality.[13] From my limited perspective, the church has informally divided a long time ago between those congregations who seek to find peace in sexually essentialist accounts of human identity, and those who seek to find their identity elsewhere. We have seen such splits in Christian history, as when Arian churches found it impossible to believe that divinity could sully itself with humanity.

12. Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," 5.

13. For an overview of the unfolding events, see Rhys Bezzant's essay in the present volume.

Thankfully, the right of free assembly protected by our democracies allows cultural space for each such community to assemble and attempt to find peace in its own way. Each community may have to conduct its experiment in theological anthropology over decades, perhaps even centuries. What lies ahead is the delicate political task of discerning how we might live alongside one another in relative harmony. Perhaps our divisions can stay informal, and perhaps our communities may yet find how to live alongside one another in our respective quests for peace and wholeness. Or perhaps we do well to formally name a parting of ways, for the peace that honesty and clarity can bring. I am unsure which path the circumstances demand. No one could envy the Archbishop's task of discernment in this matter.

He has made two comments during the time-frame of the dispute. I know little about their significance in context, but my argument has some relevance to each.

On the one hand, in a recent lecture[14] the Archbishop uses Romans 1:26 as a worked example for a proper hermeneutic. He takes care to insist that the example is not intended to settle controversy in the church, but to show how texts are used and may better be used. There is a debate to be had about his treatment of this text, but I want simply to question a point made in passing and another point central to his argument.

The point made in passing is that this text "is, for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality." I am not sure how to find or measure this majority, but I hope to have shown the way conservative appeals to "biblical authority" on human sexuality do not need to rest shakily upon this single text. A related allusion was made twenty years earlier when Professor Williams quipped "Happily there is more to Paul than the (much quoted in this context) first chapter of Romans!" (p. 316). The ongoing suggestion that conservative sexual ethics relies upon "an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts," such as Rom 1:26, ignores treatments that really cannot be discounted so easily.[15]

14. Williams, *"The Bible: Reading and Hearing": A Special Larkin-Stuart Lecture* (2007) (Trinity College, University of Toronto: 16 April), http://www.trinity.utoronto.ca/News_Events/News/archbishop.htm.

15. See for example the excellent work by Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2003).

The central point in the Archbishop's argument is that to deploy Romans 1:26 against others evades the letter's eventual charge (in chapter 2) that the reader is also very flawed. I simply submit that every serious conservative treatment of homosexuality that I have recently heard is at pains to stress the same point. If there is anything to be learnt from the gay and lesbian community's ongoing charge of "homophobia," it is that *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). In this sense, the church is completely inclusive.

On the other hand, the Archbishop surprised many in his recent Dutch interview when he disputed the interpretation of "inclusiveness" insisted upon by particular gay Christian groups:

> [C]onversion means conversion of habits, behaviours, ideas, emotions. The boundaries are determined by what it means to be loyal to Jesus Christ. That means to display in all things the mind of Christ. Paul is always saying this in his letters: Ethics is not a matter of a set of abstract rules, it is a matter of living the mind of Christ. That applies to sexual ethics; that is why fidelity is important in marriage . . .[16]

I am unclear on the details of his dispute with that community, and do not wish to score a cheap shot by noting his dissent. Rather, I am interested in two important aspects of his response.

First, at our best (and only by the Spirit's power), conservative Christians also want to practice the Archbishop's description. We do not seek for some Scriptural arsenal against gays and lesbians, but seek with them to discover and then live "the mind of Christ."

Second therefore, we begin to see what is at stake when we are also called upon to interrogate our own ideologies, habits, and emotions. We begin to see the way we are helplessly reliant upon Christ in the reordering of our own desires, sexual or otherwise. We begin to see how our own treasured essentialisms are graciously interrogated and altered in Christ. So we ask that we might join together in fellowship across our differences, subjecting all our ideologies and emotional beliefs to the power of the Spirit. The project may seem daunting and dark for each of us at times. Yet as a fellowship of friends in Christ, we will be freed into many joyful surprises as our proper identities and vocations in him become gradually but surely disclosed.

16. Houtman, "Not Inclusive," n.p.