

NEWS & OPINIONS

Faith Integration as a Defensive Shield, Not a Conquering Sword: Clarification and Response to Questions and Critiques by Jenell Paris

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I want to thank Jenell Paris for reading and commenting on my article. Her task was a challenging one—to provide commentary simultaneously on three distinct articles by three separate authors on three related but discrete topics: a.) marriage, b.) biological sex and gender, and c.) same-sex sexuality. All authors (including Paris) are anthropologists, are Christians, and have served as professors for much of our lives in evangelical institutions.

My task in responding to Paris also has challenges, in part because Paris sometimes rightly discusses matters treated in one or both of the other papers, but not my own. While I am deeply interested in all these topics, I will concentrate on the issues I deem most pertinent to the focus of my article.

Clarifying Ambiguities

At times, Paris characterizes my arguments in ways that are not inaccurate, but which nonetheless introduce potential ambiguities as to my position. On other occasions, where Paris attempts to make broad generalizations about all three essays, and sometimes when commenting on my specific contribution, she does not appear to have accurately understood my thinking. Of course, when a top scholar fails to grasp one's ideas accurately, it is possibly because of ambiguities or lack of clarity in the original article—

which means that others might well similarly misunderstand. Thus, I am pleased to have the opportunity to clarify my arguments and respond to the substantive questions and critiques posed by Paris.

Critiquing Christianity?

Paris indicates that the three articles provide “critique” of “Christianity.” While I have often critiqued how Christians in different times and places have erred consequentially,¹ I have never understood myself to be critiquing either the truth of Scripture or the Christian faith. Thus, to avoid ambiguity, I prefer to avoid wording implying that I critique “Christianity.” To the extent that my article critiques Christians, it critiques them for being insufficiently Christian. Each evangelical institution where Paris, Gil, Rynkiewich, and I have taught affirms the authority of Scripture and the biblical teaching that sex belongs only in marriage (understood biblically as a cross-sex union). I believe this correctly represents what Scripture requires of faithful Christians. My criticism is not with these stated commitments but with the relative failure by those who share such faith commitments to prioritize the intellectual work needed to work out the appropriate implications of these stated convictions through our professional scholarly work.

¹ On realities as diverse as race (Priest 2007b; Priest and Priest 2007; Priest and Nieves 2007a; Priest and Nieves 2007b), witchcraft (Priest 2009; 2015a; 2015b; 2018a; 2019; 2020a; 2020b), “recovered memories” (Priest and Cordill 2012; 2014), Bible translation (Priest 2011; 2020a), or short-term missions (2007a; 2008; 2010a; 2010b).

Defending Tradition?

When Paris describes the three authors as “committed members” of “Christian traditions” and then summarizes me as contrasting “traditional sexual ethics” with “consent-based ethics,” this wording might lead readers to understand my argument in ways I do not intend. It is, of course, perfectly appropriate to refer to me as in a different Christian tradition than a Roman Catholic believer, for example. I do use “tradition” in my article in this way. But this wording might also be interpreted to the effect that “tradition” functions as an authority in my argument. It does not. Some Christians do, of course, appeal to extra-biblical ecclesiastical tradition as the basis of religious truth claims.² However, along with most evangelical Christians, I understand only Scripture (*sola scriptura*) as an authoritative source of religious truth. Similarly, most institutions that articulate an ethic of sex only in male-female marriage ground their ethic in Scripture. When they sometimes appeal to Christian historical understandings, this history is nearly always framed as a confirmatory witness to the clarity of biblical teaching rather than as an independent source of authority. And among the faculty I surveyed, those who agreed “the Bible is without error in what it affirms” were the most likely to endorse this ethic. I did not use the phrase “traditional sexual ethics” in my survey or my article and did not portray myself or those I studied as committed to “traditional sexual ethics.” The faith-based ethic I considered was the ethic formally affirmed and verbalized in scores of institutional statements, as shown in the appendix of my article, an ethic understood as reflecting biblical teaching.

What are the Competing Paradigms?

When Paris summarizes me as comparing the appeal of “consent-based ethics” and “traditional sexual ethics,” she somewhat mischaracterizes my argument on both sides. On one side, I had identified in university statements a sexual ethic of “mere consent”—with temporary consent at any given moment for any given sexual act with any given person(s) as the “solitary” center of sexual ethics. On the other side, I had identified a faith-based ethic of sex only in covenant marriage (with marriage understood as a cross-sex union). Here consent

involves a sexually exclusive long-term covenant commitment to another person. I summarized the work of anthropologist Joseph Henrich (2020), who demonstrated that while a wide variety of traditional kinship and marriage practices do routinely violate consent, Christianity historically played a decisive role in combatting such tradition-based violations and insisting on consent. In short, it is not “traditional sexual ethics” that I defended or have any wish to defend. And it is a peculiar subspecies of consent that I critiqued.

And when Paris then argues that “consent-based ethics” are more “in harmony” with American legal and political institutions and values (including the “U.S. Constitution”) than the alternative paradigm, I find myself puzzled by what she means. Given one possible interpretation of the argument, I would wish to argue she is wrong. It is not clearly the case that our ideologies of sexual consent are all that congruent with other aspects of our society. Consider American no-fault divorce law, practiced in every state and mandated as the only form of divorce permitted in many states. Under the current logic of mere consent, either partner in a marriage can, at will and without cause, revoke marital commitments and dissolve the marriage—with no adverse consequences for being the party that unilaterally violates prior stated commitments. By contrast, in our society, young adults who take loans with an agreement to repay them have no such option of unilaterally abrogating a prior commitment. Indeed, I cannot think of any other arena in our society where a law-abiding reasonably good moral adult who lives by their publicly articulated commitments to another party, with no fault shown or even asserted, can nonetheless have state representatives (judges, police, social workers) coercively intervene against them (to remove them from their home, adjudicate its sale, distribute the assets, and tell them when they may see their children, and under what conditions), all in service of the wishes of the party that unilaterally broke with prior commitments, and with no adverse consequences to that party for renouncing previous commitments made in a legally recognized ceremony with the ritual form of a covenant.

Nor is it clearly the case that the U.S. Constitution, democracy, and values of freedom conflict with Christian values. At the very core of biblical

² For example, Roman Catholic beliefs that Mary lived a life without personal and original sin and that pastors must be unmarried celibates are not derived from any clear biblical teaching, but simply from later ecclesiastical pronouncements understood as official church doctrine.

understandings of conversion and faith lies voluntary and uncoerced consent. Thus, countless American Christians have delighted in the U.S. Constitution and political system for protecting uncoerced consent. Consider the award-winning and already classic article “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” by Robert Woodberry (2012), which upended dominant political science theories. This article demonstrated statistically that the historically distributed presence of conversionist Protestant missionaries best predicted the globally distributed development of stable democracies with religious liberty, mass education, a free press, a wealth of voluntary organizations, and legal protections for non-whites in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conversionist Protestant missionaries believed that genuine conversion required uncoerced consent. Precisely because of their commitment to uncoerced consent, these missionaries played a crucial role in the global emergence of liberal democracies worldwide.

But perhaps I’ve misunderstood Paris. As I read her warnings about ‘power’ and of ‘weaponizing one’s symbols for the sake of gaining dominance,’ it strikes me that perhaps Paris is less objecting to my intended argument than she is responding to a misperception of my intent—perhaps due to insufficient clarity on my part. That is, maybe she thinks I am wishing to propose that Christians who affirm the paradigm of no-sex-outside-of-marriage (with marriage understood as an opposite-sex union) should be lobbying to make this ethical paradigm the legally mandated paradigm for all Americans. And of course, if this were my intent, it would be reasonable for her to ask if this goal was compatible with the U.S. Constitution, democracy, and freedom. If this was her reading of my article, let me clarify that this was not my intent. For me, this is neither a desirable nor achievable goal. I suppose I did not repudiate this goal with sufficient clarity, in part perhaps from a misplaced assumption that no one would assume such a goal was even possible in current America, given the governing scripts of our sex-saturated culture. It is not merely a modest subset of “sexual minorities” that disapproves of the historic Christian understanding of sexual ethics, but the majority of Americans—at least as evidenced by the work of the symbol-manipulating classes of our society. Virtually no scripts in contemporary American novels, TV, or movies feature admired characters reserving

sex only for marriage.³ Most unmarried students in American universities are sexually active, as are most students in American public high schools (Kann et al., 2016). Indeed, sexual abstinence for unmarried post-pubescent teens or adults is frequently mocked, as students from evangelical or conservative Catholic homes quickly learn. Sexuality scholars themselves recognize that an ethic restricting sex to marriage is “untenable” in all but a small subset of religious colleges (e.g., Monto and Carey 2014, 614).

Culture Wars and the Logic of “Outliers”?

Paris warns about the “allure of warfare,” about the dangers of engaging others through the “techniques and metaphors of warfare,” and of “weaponizing one’s symbols for the sake of gaining dominance.” She suggests—if I understand her correctly—that my use of the concept of “outlier” is “power-laden” and might lend itself to weaponizing effect, contributing to “stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and even violence” towards various sexual minorities. She suggests that while strangers and foreigners might be considered outliers, the “Bible portrays idealized polities” that include and integrate all such vulnerable persons into societal safe havens.

I have already clarified that my article did not aim to impose Christian views of sex and marriage on society. The goal was not “gaining dominance.” But if not, why did I frame much of my argument in anthropological terms rather than purely religious ones? And why did my article focus specifically on marriage as a cross-sex union, which is where I first raise the matter of “outliers”? And why have many religious colleges only recently revised their formal statements on sexual ethics to specify an understanding of marriage as a conjugal union between husband and wife? While I do not believe Paris accurately characterizes my discussion of the “outlier” logic or my intent in its use, I am grateful to her for raising an issue that merits further clarification and nuance. And, given the seriousness of Paris’s framing of the matter, a sustained response is needed.

Over decades American laws have evolved to permit or even protect the rights of citizens to act in ways that others religiously disapprove on such matters as pornography use and consumption, mate-poaching

³ With some exceptions for historical period pieces.

behavior,⁴ and unilateral no-fault divorce. But such laws did not require religious institutions and actors to endorse or support those legally permitted actions. Freedom both to act and to disapprove of such actions were both protected. Various such laws arguably had adverse outcomes for society. But they did not threaten religious liberty. And while the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973) might naturally have threatened religious freedom, other laws with strong bipartisan support immediately clarified that a woman's "right" to an abortion did not entail the requirement that any particular person or institution (medical doctor, nurse, hospital, taxpayer) cooperate in the performance of abortions. Again, citizens were granted rights to act in religiously disapproved ways but without requiring other parties (religious or otherwise) to endorse, support, or participate in that action.

But the Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) on same-sex marriage, according to the four dissenting justices, adopted a legal logic that fundamentally threatened religious liberty. It provided no countervailing protections. In some respects, as I've argued elsewhere (Priest 2018b, 28),

Obergefell v. Hodges has similarities to the 1983 Supreme Court decision *Bob Jones University v. United States*, which ruled that religious justifications could not be used to violate the rights of racial minorities. In effect, the *Bob Jones* decision differentiated good religion from bad in the eyes of the government, providing conditions under which the government could disregard its normal constitutionally articulated commitment to religious neutrality, and Bob Jones University lost its tax-exempt status. And yet the *Bob Jones* decision was not experienced by religious America as a significant threat for the simple reason that America's mainstream Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and black Protestant) rather uniformly agreed that Bob Jones's stance constituted "bad religion" and lacked biblical warrant. By contrast, *Obergefell* drew a line between good religion and bad, not by framing a small outlier as bad but rather the majority of American religious institutions.⁵ Furthermore, the notion that people come in naturally-occurring biological types (races) that must be prevented from

mixing is a modern idea found nowhere in the Bible. Thus, even Christian communities committed fully to the authority of Scripture or the Magisterium found that the repudiation of such racial and eugenicist ideologies created no inherent difficulties for them in their commitment to Scripture or Magisterium. By contrast, from earliest Christian history, church leaders uniformly understood Scripture to teach that marriage is normatively between a woman and a man who practice sexual exclusivity and that all other sexual relationships, including same-sex sexual activities, are sinful.

Furthermore, while *Bob Jones University v. United States* required the repudiation of a modernist social construction ("race"), *Obergefell v. Hodges*, by contrast, embraced a modernist social construction, that of "sexual orientation" (2015: 3, 8, 13), as the basis for its repudiation of the received view of marriage as a male-female union. The Supreme Court, of course, could have employed the same pluralist logic as it had when protecting the rights of adherents of minority religions. That is, they could have acted to protect the rights of all parties equally to live out alternative visions of the good. Instead, they adopted the legal criterion used to repudiate race-based discrimination, where "immutability" (of phenotypic traits underpinning race categories such as hair texture or skin color) provided the legal criterion for establishing a protected "suspect class" status justifying strict scrutiny. Thus when the U.S. Supreme Court repeatedly insisted that "sexual orientations" are "immutable" (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015: 4, 8), apparently based on "new" (11, 20), "enhanced" (23), and "better informed" (19) "insights" (11, 20) and "societal understandings" (19, 20, 23), it was explicitly framing previous marriage understandings, for legal purposes, as parallel to racist ideologies. And, racist ideologies merit no religious accommodations.

I did not write my article at the historical moment when our society was trying to decide whether to permit "same-sex marriage" and on what basis. Rather, I wrote it in a post-*Obergefell* era, where our society is debating whether or not to allow religious institutions (such as those reviewed in my article) to live out an alternative ethical vision of sex and marriage. In short, my concern with the rhetorical logic of something as

⁴ Intentionally attempting to seduce and sexually solicit already married individuals, an act that in many societies historically was an actionable legal offense.

⁵ I include congregations here, as well as the wide variety of other religious institutions—not institutions of higher education alone.

an “outlier” emerges analytically, not in the context of a power move by Christians against others, but of others against Christian liberty to articulate and live out their ethic in their own lives and religious institutions.

I don’t recall my article employing military metaphors. But since Paris raises the warfare metaphor, let me clarify my purpose using her metaphor, elaborated through two instruments of battle. I did not intend, in my article, to wield an aggressive sword coercively against the liberty of others but to forge a shield, towards the end of protecting the liberty of individuals and institutions wishing to operate with, and defend, an alternative, and biblically-based, vision of sex and marriage. As I argued, I do not believe a purely exegetical appeal to Scripture provides adequate foundations for a robust religious liberty appeal. For those who do not accept Scripture, a strictly biblical appeal does not counteract the charge that the viewpoint is an irrational extremist outlier, protecting no essential goods, serving only animus.

Thus my article demonstrated how an “outlier” logic was attributed to the historic Christian view of marriage and underpinned the sentiments of those wishing for the government to coercively act against individuals and institutions operating with historic Christian views. In rebuttal, I demonstrate that marriage as a cross-sex conjugal union is anything but an outlier. I argue that in the broad sweep of history, the new ethical sexual paradigm of mere consent, as articulated by the sexual consent architects of America’s elite universities, is the outlier. Furthermore, I make the case that the ethic of “mere consent” arguably does a poorer job protecting against consent violation than does the ethical paradigm articulated in the scores of religious universities I consider. Paris does not directly question the accuracy of my argument on either of the above points. Instead, she warns of other possible uses of “outlier” that diverge from my use of the concept. I have no interest in defending possible usages of the term other than the ones I use myself. And on my central points, Paris does not argue that I am wrong.

Epistemology

As an evangelical Christian who is an anthropologist, I believe Scripture provides normative teaching on how best to order our lives in the area of sexuality and marriage. But sexuality and marriage also exist in worlds of human interaction that anthropologists can directly study. Based on field research in

an Amazonian indigenous culture, my dissertation explored at length (134 pages) a dramatically different sexual culture from our own (Priest 1993, 354-487). I am not unusual. Anthropologists have done this worldwide, exploring radically different sexual cultures, such as those examined by Michael Rynkiewicz (2022). Among other observations, anthropologists have found that the modern notion of sexual orientation as biologically based and thus immutable and life-long fails to comport with, and account for, the same-sex sexual lifeways that existed in pre-colonial societies (Herdt 2018, 14, 58-61; 1999).

Sexuality is also inflected with taboos, anxieties, obsessions, secrecy, manipulative deceptions, impulses towards privacy, desires to present oneself in the best light possible, with psychological tendencies towards rationalization, denial, and projection—all of which complicate anyone’s ability to study such realities objectively. The truths humans willingly share with others are selective and sometimes outright lies. And human researchers are also fully human, finite, and inflected by subjective motivations themselves.

Margaret Mead’s bestseller *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), featuring Samoan adolescent sexuality, made Mead the most famous anthropologist of her day. But a half-century later, Derek Freeman (1983; 1998), based on decades of research, made the compelling case that Mead had gotten her facts about Samoan sexuality almost entirely wrong. Her book had made its mark, not because of quality fieldwork and accurate information, but because its moral message was attractive to American readers.

Even the best anthropologists, with rich ethnographies based on high-quality data collection and written with theoretical sophistication, are selective in the truths they explore. Other analytic frames and prioritized collection of other sorts of data might yield different considerations. Consider the outstanding research of Gilbert Herdt on Sambia sexual lifeways, which Rynkiewicz (2022) reviews. Herdt passingly reports that Melanesian populations typically show a “marked imbalance of males over females at birth” and mentions two studies of Sambia births showing that more boys were born than girls (by a ratio of 120/100 and 100/70). Herdt acknowledges the possibility that demographic factors might be relevant to the centrality of same-sex sexuality for the Sambia but drops the matter after a comment to the effect that correlation does not equal causality (Herdt 1984: 57-58). Elsewhere, he mentions that the Sambia practiced “female infanticide” (Herdt 2006: 25). But he reports no

statistics on the frequency of female infanticide and how this further adversely impacted the ratio of males to females. No age and gender pyramid is ever given. We also learn that polygyny is idealized, with powerful and senior men acquiring multiple wives at the expense of weaker men (Herdt 2006, 25), collecting wives “in the manner of collecting possum pelts” (31). Sambia wives are unhappy when their husbands add another wife, initiating fights with “dreadful cursing and brawls” (1999, 79). In any case, no statistics on polygyny are provided, no analysis of how this marriage monopoly by older men skews the marriage market. We learn what the above demographic facts would lead us to expect: there is a marked age divide at marriage, with young girls even in infancy being betrothed to young men. But precise and numeric details are lacking.

My field research was with the Aguaruna of Peru, in which, like the Sambia, older married men historically had a polygynous monopoly on younger women. The Aguaruna stressed to young men the virtue of abstaining from sex with women as the route to power channeled in warfare. In mythic stories told to boys, heroes of the past allegedly waited until they were 35 to marry, with the great warrior Bikut achieving power through sexual abstinence. When an Aguaruna Bikut and a Huambisa Bikut simultaneously killed each other, observers reported, their foreskins were tight. They had remained sexually abstinent and pure. However, unlike Sambia polygynists in Herdt’s account, Aguaruna polygynists had to deal with young unmarried males regularly attempting adulterous liaisons with their wives. What the Sambia had, which the Aguaruna did not, was a highly scripted arena of same-sex sexuality for young men as an alternative sexual focus. Indeed, societies with harems and other polygynous monopolies on marriageable women seem rather frequently to also have a parallel development of same-sex sexual lifeways for young men not (yet) able to marry. My point here is not to make a definitive argument but to suggest simply that alternative research questions and approaches have the potential to uncover additional and countervailing considerations, even in settings where high-quality research already exists. The moral import of all this is an open question.

In short, while I love anthropology and believe it is possible through anthropological research to acquire many understandings of human realities, I do not generally believe that anthropology can provide adequate foundations for ethics. There are limits to our ability to infer and convincingly persuade others of

any binding normative *ought*, purely from empirical analysis of what *is*.

My epistemology in this article reflects the sequence of the article. I begin with a faith-based sexual ethical paradigm, as articulated in numerous formal statements by religious colleges and universities that affirm the integration of faith and learning. This paradigm emerges not from the study of anthropology but from the Christian belief that there is a good, loving, and all-wise God who wishes to be known and to provide guidance for our moral and spiritual lives. God does this in and through Scripture. And this includes moral guidelines for sex and marriage.

In the second section of my article, I explore additional survey evidence that the relevant paradigm is linked to Christian faith and confidence in the truth of Scripture. I also see evidence that a dominant objection to this ethic, and to feeling justified in seeking to apply governmental power against those affirming the ethic, is a belief that the ethic, especially the male-female marriage aspect, is extremist and irrational, an outlier in the world of reason and understanding.

But the Bible itself, in various passages, grounds this ethic in the very fabric of creation, and on occasion, implies that the truth of such an ethic is intuitively recognizable by all. If correct, it would not be surprising to discover this in worldwide patterns. Thus, as a subordinate and secondary step, I consider whether marriage as a male-female union is present the world over, and if so, consider what the contours of this institution suggest as to its central end. Here, I make a sort of natural law argument, although admittedly a weak one. I do not believe that the exposition I provide will naturally persuade everyone of the truth of the ethic, and certainly not that such an exposition provides adequate foundations to impose the ethic on everyone coercively. But in the context of a charge that the Christian ethic is an irrational extremist outlier, motivated by hate, I believe any honest assessment of the evidence should lead to the conclusion that the paradigm has a plausible logic with positive outcomes in view. I would hope this lays enhanced foundations for a favorable consideration of the overall truth claims of the Christian faith. I also hope that it influences people to support pluralist political structures that allow Christians and Christian universities legally to live out and defend their vision of the good, alongside the rights of others to live out and defend alternative visions.

Some issues that Paris raises for me seem to be grounded in a misconstrual of my epistemology. She

seems to feel that my argument should require me to object to birth control, for example, to be consistent. But I see nothing in Scripture requiring married couples to have as many children as possible or banning birth control. In this paper, I only defend ethical sexual ideals if I understand Scripture to teach them, and secondarily if worldwide cultural patterns coincide with such biblical teaching (about marriage as a cross-sex union, for example), and thirdly as an exposition of variable dynamics related to the core patterns. Thus a concern for paternity confidence likely occurs everywhere marriage historically existed, but the precise mechanisms associated with this varied. I nonetheless also explore variable cultural mechanisms (such as the *couvade*) intended to signal a concern for paternity confidence, even though any such specific cultural item was not universal.

Paris wonders why I do not further discuss the sexual double standard, which she implies is part of the package of the “traditional sexual ethic” she seems to see me defending. But as noted above, I have no allegiance to tradition. I do not believe Scripture requires a different sexual standard for men and women. But yes, even folk Catholic *machismo* cultures of Spain (Brandes 1980, 177-204; Gilmore 2017) and Colombia (Brusco 1995) exemplify a sexual double standard where women should reserve sex for marriage, but where men strive to exemplify sexual virility, not chastity. In Brusco’s analysis, Colombian women focus their attention on children and home, with men largely absent from the home with machismo status pursued in the street, the brothel, and the bar. But with conversion to evangelical Christianity and a new alignment with biblical teaching, men redirect towards marital chastity and the flourishing of their wife and children. In this feminist anthropologist’s telling of the story, evangelical conversion dramatically moved men away from the sexual double standard.

Paris seems to question the value of the “nuclear family structure”, which she says “leaves children dependent on only two adults, and each adult primarily on only one other.” In my article, I follow anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss and George Peter Murdock, who define “nuclear family” as comprised of husband and wife and their children, but where nothing in their definition or analysis requires that it be disembedded from other kin ties. My son, his wife, and two kids constitute a nuclear family. The fact that my wife and I also live in the same home does not count against them being a nuclear family, as defined by these anthropologists. And what my article showed, citing

anthropologists, is that children born to married parents, and married parents themselves, have, on average, more supportive social ties with a more extensive network of relatives than any family form that does not involve children raised by married parents.

Paris raises various other issues that genuinely merit further attention, but which time and space on this occasion no longer allow. I would wish to thank her for helping focus my attention on named issues that I will want to address in the future. I am deeply appreciative of her help on these matters.

Conclusion

Several years ago, after a month of interviewing pastors in Kinshasa about their ministries related to street children, the pastors invited me out to a restaurant, their treat. They wished to interview me—about the American church generally and my own church, specifically. Were we remaining faithful to Scripture in the area of sexual and marital ethics? I initially imagined they were primarily preoccupied with homosexuality. So in the next few days, as I did follow-up interviews with them, I focused my question on their own church’s ministries related to sex and marriage. I had already understood the pastors to say that in this poverty-stricken third largest city of Africa, the tens of thousands of street children to whom they ministered seldom came from intact homes but instead came from sexually promiscuous partnering and broken families. But now, I learned of special church programs and dedicated staff, entire committees even, assigned to guide, mentor, pray with, and chaperone all courtship relations of church members, to facilitate marital agreements with extended family, and to actively intervene and direct people into biblically approved marriages. No courtship could even begin until the pastor had approved. There was a level of supervised interventions one could not imagine in America. And pastors in poverty-stricken urban settings would tell me with deep satisfaction things like, “for years, our church has worked to ensure that our members have good marriages and practice good parenting. In the last ten years, under our ministry, every child born to any of our members was born to married parents. And these marriages have stayed together.” As I learned of their ministries, it became clear that homosexuality was not their preoccupation at a local level. Why then, I wondered were they disturbed about the American church and in relation to homosexuality? In my last interviews, it struck me.

These pastors had an entire biblical paradigm for sex and marriage which provided the life-changing foundation for ministry and guidance in the areas of sex and marriage. In their understanding, one cannot arbitrarily choose which parts of Scripture to observe—and still have a binding ethic with real transformative power. Thus, for them, the perception that American Christians were not clearly articulating and defending the entirety of biblical teaching was disturbing.

One section of my article considers whether a third ethical paradigm is possible, which retains biblical teaching on sex and marriage while modifying only the male-female specificity of the paradigm. As reported, I could find no evidence that a credible case for this possibility currently exists.

Christians must clarify and defend what Scripture actually teaches in every era, with different issues coming to the fore in different periods. Christology was clarified in response to Gnosticism. Soteriology in response to the sale of indulgences. And so on. In today's era, some of the most fundamental issues that we face involve theological anthropology in relation to such things as sexuality and marriage.

From Kinshasa to Chicago, no Christian community will successfully achieve the goal of social reproduction, of successfully transmitting its faith to the next generation, if its Christian leaders and scholars do not embrace a commitment to defending the goodness and wisdom of God on the very matters Scripture addresses clearly. And the most pressing issues of our day include especially sexuality and marriage.

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