

The Structure of Song's Argument in *Covenant and Calling*

- **Preface.** Song introduces us to methodologies espoused and rejected (see comments below), and introduces us to central features of his argument (which I leave to the appropriate place in the following chapters).
- He notes that while we can learn from advocates of same-sex relationships who appeal to models of (i) lesbian or gay friendship; (ii) quasi-marital same-sex union; or (iii) equal marriage, that will not be his approach because (a) there are questions about how they handle scriptural texts; (b) there is a failure to deal adequately with marriage as a *creation* good, intrinsically open to procreation; and (c) there is an assumption that commitments to other 'goods' of marriage, faithfulness and permanence, are separable in principle from procreation, without a compelling theological justification for this.
- His work is also different from more conservative accounts of marriage and sexuality despite their being (i) closer to the 'surface meaning' of pertinent biblical texts; and (ii) sustaining rightly the sense of marriage as a created good. Song claims they frequently forget that the Church has no ultimate stake in the propagation and survival of the species.
- Song indicates three paths he has tried **not** to follow in this study: (a) a programmatically 'liberal' methodology (xi) involving, e.g., the 'privileging of experience over Scripture/ tradition/ reason; (b) secular patterns of thought, e.g. with respect to 'rights'; that the Church change its moral teaching to 'move with the times', or to fit perceived missiological needs' (xiv); and (c) an incipiently 'docetic' approach which plays down the created nature of bodies and bodily difference. (xiv-xvi)
- Instead Song highlights: (a) the centrality of the work of seeking to understand the Scriptures, yet not just to restate these but rather to discern their meaning for us in our world; (b) the Church's need to raise questions about secular views on and practice of sexuality which all too easily becomes pornographic, predatory or promiscuous; (c) The Church's need to challenge the view that 'sex is immaterial' or 'that there is in principle no connection at all between sex and procreation', or that it doesn't matter what Christians do with their bodies.

- **Chapter 1.** Largely on the basis of Genesis 1-2 the Church has long recognized three creation 'goods' of marriage: faithfulness, permanence and procreation.
- The advent of Christ has brought about a significant, eschatological change
 - Procreation is now 'theologically redundant' for Christians (based on Lk 20:34-36, esp. v 35 where the phrase 'neither marry nor are given in marriage' in Greek is present tense rather than future)
 - This is seen in the new NT gift and vocation of celibacy
- **Chapter 2.** Might there not be other relationships which witness to this new, eschatological era?
 - Non-procreative relationships, but which share the other creation 'goods' (faithfulness and permanence, as well as a different kind of 'fruitfulness')
 - Such relationships would also be a vocation
- Committed 'covenant partnerships' fit this space
 - Are childless marriages of various kinds 'pointers' to such a category?
 - 'if we are to introduce the category of covenant partnership at all, the fundamental distinction it connotes is not between heterosexual and homosexual relationships but between pro-creative and non-procreative relationships.'
 - [Covenant partnerships could, of course, be heterosexual (e.g., what are presently non-procreative 'marriages')]
 - [Covenant partnerships could also include non-sexually-active same-sex relationships (e.g., men in monastic orders)]
- **Chapter 3.** Can covenant partnerships include sexually active same-sex partners?
 - Sexual differentiation is justified within marriage, but only because marriage in creation is oriented to procreation; it's not necessary for covenant relationships
 - procreation is no longer eschatologically necessary in this eschatological era, so there are no grounds for requiring all committed relationships to be heterosexual
 - Sex can be good in itself, apart from any role in procreation (e.g., Gen 2; Song of Songs; 1 Cor 7 'conjugal rights')
 - Sex can point to the nature of our relationship with God (e.g., the intimacy of communion with our partner can point to that which we can experience with God)

- **Chapter 4.** Song reads Romans 1, Genesis 19, Leviticus 18, etc, in relatively conventional and conservative ways
- The discussion of these passages has been left till this point in the book so as to draw a contrast between the **surface meaning** of texts and the **deeper structure** of the biblical story he has been arguing for in chapters 1-3 [*my emphasis*]
 - In other words, the above texts are read as assuming the Genesis patterning in which sexual differentiation is justified within marriage, but only because marriage in creation is oriented to procreation; procreation, however, is no longer necessary for covenant relationships
 - There is no surface trajectory in the NT towards same-sex relationships
 - Nevertheless, such same-sex relationships are in sympathy with the fundamental commitments and ‘deeper structure’ of the biblical story revealed in the NT
- Does this not fly in the face of Paul’s teaching that even in eschatological contexts (1 Cor 6; Eph 5:5) same-sex relationships are not morally acceptable?
 - For Paul, or Jesus, to have countenanced homosexuality would have been profoundly scandalous in first century Judaism
- Does the fact that it would have been impossible in the first century mean that it must be impossible for us?
 - Our positions on issues such as slavery, and the role of women in church and marriage have changed significantly since then in the face of biblical texts
 - The just war issue reads the NT against its plain meaning
- **Chapter 5.** Song considers rather tentatively the pros and cons of how covenant partnerships might map onto existing legal categories in society
- Covenant partnership as civil partnership (with a civil ceremony followed by liturgical blessing)
 - Pro – brings out the distinction between marriage and covenant partnership
 - Cons – it would principally be same-sex relationships, distorting the theological point; marriage and civil partnership are widely perceived as being unequal
- Covenant partnership as marriage
 - Pro – ease

- Cons – this would lend itself too easily to the denial of the significance of sexual difference with consequences for our understanding of ourselves and sexual relations; might yield to secular trends
- Marriage as covenant partnership
 - Could covenant partnership in fact be the **deeper** and more embracing category, with marriage as the special case?
 - Only the bravest of ecclesiastical pioneers would abandon the language of marriage in favour of covenant partnership

Chapter 6.

- Song concludes by reviewing the changes in sexual mores since the 1950s and by looking at the way ahead for the churches that have been left reeling and unsure how to respond
- He identifies a need for (i) a major re-imagination of the churches' relation to culture, without endorsing current trends; (ii) discernment, 'interrogating the times to see what is of value in them' - an 'exceptionally complex' task; (iii) an appreciation of the undisputed gains of the past century; (iv) an unflinchingly disabused awareness of the casualties of the sexual revolution and of the social consequences; (v) the avoidance of the danger of being conformed to the reigning secular logics of our day, and of just acceding to culture's demands
- He suggests that: (i) The churches' tone cannot be one of increasingly shrill and bitter denunciation, if they are to be heralds of good news in a changed world; (ii) people will be drawn to the good by beauty rather than forced to it by law;
- He reminds us that (i) the Church only has one Lord and one Word of God, which it has to hear and which it has to trust and obey in life and death; and (ii) that we are also required to test the spirits, to see which are of God, which requires an openness to being transformed, to the renewing of our minds as we present ourselves as offerings to God, members together of the body of Christ.