

Summary

Introduction

What is marriage? At first glance, this might seem a somewhat silly question since marriage is such a well-established institution in our western culture. However, this question becomes important whenever the *who*, *when*, and *how* of marriage is being examined or questioned. The same is true of the current, infested situation concerning the theology of marriage and the praxis of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (EvL). The question of whether or not EvL should marry same-sex couples has been debated for more than 15 years. No solution to this threatening division seems within reach, and representatives of the different positions are often unyielding.

As a starting point for this thesis, I claim that the theology and praxis of marriage is difficult to discuss, not primarily because of the different opinions and thoughts expressed in the discussions around marriage, but mainly because of the thoughts that are *not* expressed or articulated and yet which, beneath the surface, greatly affect the discussion. Issues regarding the church's theology of marriage are difficult to solve or even advance as long as one speaks of marriage as something already defined. More importantly: questions regarding marriage theology cannot be solved as long as subjects such as love, sex, gender, children and family are viewed as clearly-defined points of departure.

Accordingly, one important task (1) for this thesis is to clarify what view of marriage EvL claims to hold and what underlying ideas this view is built upon. I focus on the view expressed in the discussions about marriage during the last decades. The materials used here include the official statements, reports and documents that can be said to present and describe the church's official view on marriage. This includes, for example, the wedding order of service, different documents prepared for the church council's decision-making bodies, various statements from episcopal conferences, et cetera. By presenting this view, and by analyzing how the different topics which are part of this view relate to each other, I want to make way for credible theological argumentation. Critically, as well as constructively, I evaluate both the openly-expressed views and the underlying ideas I find through my analysis, in order to remediate any possible discrepancies, insufficiencies and inadequacies. These insufficiencies may be uncertain his-

torical assumptions, wrongly-conceived theological outsets or points of departure, unreasonable or partial normative projections, or something similar.

A second important task (2) is to show and argue for other ways to relate theologically the different topics which are part of EvL's view of marriage to each other. This is done through what I choose to call a re-contextualization. This task is, of course, built on the premise that I claim these other theologically driven approaches to be more coherent in terms of theological argumentation, as well as in terms of being well-rooted in church tradition and being historically reliable.

The main research question of this thesis is: How can the view of marriage presented by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland be clarified, deepened and challenged. In order to answer this question, I have chosen three different themes as my point of departure: Love, sex/gender and family. One could argue that there are other themes which are just as important to discuss in a thesis on the theology of marriage, e.g. divorce, the nuptial blessing, or marriage as a cultural phenomenon. However, I decided to focus on broader themes such as love, sex/gender, and family – well aware of their magnitude. EvL's approach to concrete questions regarding marriage is strongly affected by how the church understands marriage in light of these different themes. Therefore, I want to step back from the most concrete and explicit questions in contemporary discussions on marriage, and instead focus on grasping the bigger picture in order to find new theological angles and approaches.

My argumentation is shaped by certain theological commitments, which I choose to call an ecclesiological-feminist perspective – a perspective that I both consciously choose to build on and develop during the course of this work. The ecclesiological perspective can add viewpoints to a Nordic folk church discussion about marriage that often is primarily creation-centered. In addition, I claim that an ecclesiological perspective, where the Church's unity in Christ is understood in light of Galatians 3:28, has implications for how we view gender. This leads to my feminist perspective (or perhaps queer theological, since the perspective is more anti-identity-based than identity-based). The ecclesiological-feminist perspective in this dissertation does not serve the purpose of highlighting the experience of any specific group specifically. Rather, I want to explore the consequences of the Church's radical vision for unity and what expressions this vision might take.

Love, Gender and Family

The marriage view that EvL presents as “classic” or “traditional” contains ambiguity as well as obvious conflicts. For example:

- The mutual love of the spouses has become central in the view of marriage that EvL expresses. Christian teaching on love as *agape*, one argues, supports this. The significance of sexuality thereby becomes unclear, since sexuality on the one hand is considered a gift and as such an important part of a person, and on the other hand is comprehended as external to the *agape* love, as an aspect of the human condition in need of justification through reproduction.
- During the 20th century, it has become less common in EvL to mention supposed differences between men and women in marriage. Nonetheless, during the last decades this conversation has made a comeback. At a time when EvL has abandoned reproduction as the primary purpose of marriage, a complementarity of the sexes becomes the main argument to defend the exceptional position of the heterosexual relationship. However, wherein these differences that are to complement each other lie remains unclear and is not expressed in any official documents.
- The fact that reproduction no longer holds a position as the primary good of marriage has to be considered a major shift in the marriage theology of EvL. Nonetheless, this change has not been clearly addressed. Instead, the mentioning of children has been removed from the wedding order of service and all the talk of reproduction has been toned down without discussion. Today, however, the reproductive character of marriage is once again emphasized as part of the argument against the church marrying same-sex couples.

EvL’s view of marriage and its aims have changed a great deal over the years. Some things have been toned down, while other things have been accentuated – shifts which have often been driven by what is currently considered significant. Whether these shifts in emphasis should be regarded as problematic or not divides people, and many refuse to acknowledge these fundamental adjustments and revisions. The desire to see the view of marriage as traditional is understandable. Nonetheless, considering the

major shifts in the marriage view of EvL it must be considered misleading that these changes are not openly acknowledged, for example, there is a lack of mentioning of older understandings which are currently inevitably being undermined through what is now being expressed. Conversely, these shifts in opinion are left more or less unnoticed in an attempt to enforce the notion that the view of marriage currently expressed is in fact traditional, classic, and consistent.

A closer examination of the view of marriage expressed by EvL shows that the contradictions and ambiguities that now characterize the view of marriage that EvL communicates need to be clarified. One way to begin this work is to take a closer look at the theological ideas that underlie the view of love, sex, and family which now characterize the conversation. Once this is done, these ideas can be clarified, deepened, and challenged.

Love and Marriage

According to EvL, love and marriage are closely related. One marries for love, and marriage is understood as a way of living together that best protects delicate love. Marriage is, to put it simply, in the service of love. There is, however, a theological inconsistency in the different church documents I have worked with, regarding the relationship between marriage and love expressed and the perception of the different types of love that characterize marriage. They talk about *eros* and *agape*, demanding and serving love. Agape, the self-sacrificing and serving love, is consistently described as the most important love in a marriage. At the same time, in Lutheran theology such love is described as a gift of grace that only the Christian can receive through faith. In Lutheran thinking, it is in fact not a person who can love with such love, but Christ in them. In that sense, no person can learn how to love, or be taught love. One can only be educated in the faith that enables Christ to love through oneself (Tuomo Mannermaa, Anders Nygren). I argue that this view, that only faith in Christ allows humans to love in a truthful way, is difficult to combine with another Lutheran view – namely, the view that marriage is an “external, worldly thing” – if one argues a close relationship between agape love and marriage.

The fact that agape love is given an elevated position when EvL discusses marriage is not surprising. To the extent that marriage, according to Luther, is about love, it is first and foremost the opportunity for a Christian to live in a close relationship to one’s neighbor and thereby make possible for that neighbor to be loved with the love of Christ. Today, however, the serving agape love is also given a completely different role than in Luther’s

time, because this love is now under the great influence of the romantic ideal of love. From a theological point of view, this is not without problems, as I show, since the romantic ideal of love springs from the secularization that seeks a new god to replace the Christian God (Simon May, Ullrich Beck & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim). Love is also now expected to bear, believe, hope, and endure everything – yet no longer primarily through the power of Christ, but nowadays through the power of love itself. In addition, humankind is believed to carry a natural ability to love with this self-sacrificing, selfless love, and it is precisely this love that marriage is expected both to build upon and support. Even in church it seems to be primarily in the marital relationship and in the parent’s relationship to a child that one speaks of this love as an ideal: First Corinthians 13 is quoted more often at wedding services and on the posters at Pride parades than at demonstrations in support of refugees. Nowadays, the love that Christians in the strict New Testament texts are encouraged to live in is more often used to describe the love that in some sense is already assumed to exist within marriage and indeed the nuclear family.

I find that the romantic version of agape love as a marriage ideal, in combination with the Lutheran view that love is not something one should or even can be taught, causes problems. One such problem is that the church has a hard time explaining why and how the romantic love god is not identical to Christian love. A Christian view of love must be able to affirm what is truly Christian in the love shared by the bridal couple who come to church for their nuptial blessing, and at the same time it must be able to emphasize that all love in this world is imperfect.

Another problem that arises is how challenging it becomes for the church to describe in what sense marriage should help people to love. Wedding ceremonies often take on the nature of affirmation. The words from the First letter of John saying “God is love” enable the church to position itself uncritically in the service of the romantic love god. It is possible to imagine that the Bible – together with the rest of the western world today – testifies that “all you need is love”. The problem is that one rarely considers how this Christian love is understood through the history of the church. Instead, one takes a more general, modern conception of love – a love that does not involve the need to learn to love, but only to learn to put first – and calls this love the essence of Christianity.

One might think that romantic love has been influential in how the church speaks of love primarily through an appreciation of passion and emotion. I claim, however, that it is the opposite which seems to be the case.

The aforementioned problems arise *because* of the agape ideal, since this is the ideal that allows for interpersonal love to be idolized. One way to gain distance from these dilemmas would, therefore, be to take another look at the desiring eros love. It is here that I find Augustine's conception of the relationship between love and desire to be fruitful.

According to Augustine, desire is part of all love, and the moral value of love is determined by whether desire is ultimately understood in relation to God as the creator and the goal of everything. Thus in Augustine's view desire is not something that should primarily be toned down and chastised, but rather is something good that should be encouraged, but also directed well. This way of looking at desire differs from EvL's view, since my analysis finds that desire in EvL's view is primarily related to human biological reproduction and interpersonal relationships. By emphasizing desire as a positive power of love, crucial to all human life and its ability to live in relationship with God, however, the somewhat artificial and in many ways problematic distinction between eros and agape can be avoided.

Opening up the important role of desire might also be helpful as EvL tries to work out the relationship between love and sexuality. The self-sacrificing love, freed from desire, which is described as the most desirable type of love in a relationship, makes the desiring sexuality difficult to handle. In the various documents I investigated, the fact that love between a man and a woman take sexual expression is described as something natural. When describing homosexual love, however, this same love is mainly discussed as being equivalent to gay desire. This is problematic, since the sexual desire is not given any clear theological relevance beyond reproduction in the church documents. A deeper understanding of the place of desire in marital love – both in the marital love between people, as well as in the marital love between the soul and God, between Christ and His Church – has consequences for the *why* and *for whom* of marriage. If the longing between individuals is understood in the light of the longing that exists between God and us, as well as between the different persons of the Trinity (Rowan Williams, Ola Sigurdson), this will not only have consequences on our view of love, longing and marriage, but will also be significant for how we perceive the role of the church in our understanding of these.

The Church is many things – including a place and community into which a person is born, and where s/he is shaped and nurtured. In the Christian tradition, the church has been considered crucial to one's ability to practise the great Christian virtues. In some sense, everything the church

does is dedicated to helping people live in true love for God and their neighbor. The dedication of the church to marriage can be seen as an expression of the church's belief that marriage is part of the Christian community which helps people to grow in love. I argue that it is here that the church's interest in marriage lies. Therefore, within the church one cannot speak of "approving all forms of love". The church does not *approve* of love. The church does not *accept* love. The church does not *affirm* love. No, the church *testifies to* and *cultivates* love, and tries to support and encourage that which helps people live this love. To do this, the church needs to continue to perceive itself as a community which, despite its imperfections, knows something true about love through the long experience it has had and the revelation it has received. This is important, because the church is one of the few communities that is able to say that it knew what love was even before love was seen to be romantic. In addition, this love must be a desiring love, since the love of God is a desiring love.

Gender and Marriage

In EvL's view of marriage, gender plays an important role. This is not surprising, since the church material I have worked with is situated in a discussion about why marriage is – or is not – limited to the relationship between a man and a woman. *What* role gender plays, however, seems to be less obvious, particularly since the significance of children in marital theology has been toned down in the last decades. A complementarity between men and women, which arises from the differences that is claimed to exist between the sexes, is taken for granted. Yet, what these differences are is not articulated – either in different statements or in the wedding order of service. No answer is given to where the peculiarities of the heterosexual relationship lie, and how this peculiarity relates to the goods, aims, or essence of marriage.

In the material examined, EvL describes gender complementarity as a central aspect of the traditional view of the human being and marriage. At the same time, I have shown that complementarity has been used as a marriage theological concept for only a few decades. Until modern times it was not claimed that the Bible's creation narrative spoke of men and women as complementary or opposites of one another. That a complementary view of gender is a relatively new phenomenon and not a "traditional Christian" view is, nonetheless, a much smaller problem than the fact that the complementarity turns out to have roots in an ideological quest to perpetuate

women's subordination (Thomas Laqueur, Adrian Thatcher). Thus, a complementary view of gender does not express a traditional, Christian view of gender: it is a conception from the Enlightenment era driven by the oppression of women, which the church then imitated and thereby, you might say, "adapted to society". This needs to be remembered now when – especially from Catholic, conservative Protestant and increasingly often from right wing extremists – voices are being raised around the so-called "gender ideology" that is claimed to have a great impact on everything from preschools to legislation regarding transgender people. Gender complementarity and a strict binary view on gender are in themselves examples of gender ideology.

Where EvL has discussed gender, the focus has often been on the creation narratives and a certain kind of creation-centered reasoning. I have, therefore, wanted to highlight perspectives other than these in the hope of finding theological resources that can balance and complement a creation-theological perspective. I claim that gender also needs to be understood in the light of Christ: that the church needs to see gender as something changed – i.e. transformed – by the eschatological restoration of creation following the Resurrection of Christ. The words of the baptismal formula from Galatians 3:28 are given a central place and are allowed to challenge everything known: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Gender needs to be restored in anticipation of perfect rectification. Therefore, I have discussed how the Church, as an eschatological community that testifies to the Kingdom of God, can speak of gender also in contrast to the views limited to the secular world.

Many in the history of the church have seen this view as a true expression of the Christian faith. With the help of, among others, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximos the Confessor, I have shown how one has perceived a transgression of the sex category as a real opportunity for those living by virtue of baptism. The gifts of the Spirit and the Christian virtues are the calling of every Christian – no understanding of gender may prevent a person from spiritual growth. How the church today takes this gender-transgressing or gender-transcending calling seriously becomes a central issue. One way of doing this is to highlight what I choose to call *theological gender*. This understanding of gender extends beyond other gender categories and will somewhat mysteriously receive the task of describing the ontologically first and most true sex of a person: the sexed-ness that

enables one's relationship with and longing towards God (Sarah Coakley, Susannah Cornwall).

These perspectives can also be helpful when trying to formulate the relationship between gender, sex and sexuality within EvL. To approach the issue of gender Christocentrically, ecclesiologicaly and eschatologicaly exposes the inadequacy of seeing gender as something that will primarily serve humanity's survival through biological reproduction. The talk of theological gender includes an understanding of gender where the experience of being gendered cannot be reduced merely to interhuman interaction or attraction. Instead, a person's union with God becomes the most important aspect of their experience of being sexed.

The credibility of the church to testify faithfully to the power of the Resurrection, and the restoration made possible through it, is dependent on the church's readiness to challenge restrictive gender categories and oppose gender hierarchies. The church cannot allow gender to keep the members of Christ's body separated from one another, trapped in categories that ought to have been dissolved through baptism. Maintaining a gender difference – whether it is hierarchical or found in a striving for equality – is nothing short of limiting the transformation of baptism and the Church's eschatological witness in the world. If this is taken seriously, it will have consequences for, for example, how the church views clerical ministry and marriage.

If the church, as mentioned above, has the task of helping and encouraging people to direct their lives towards God and grow in their love of God and their neighbor, then the view of marriage and gender is also affected. Marriage is a place where we practice virtues, where we, together with the person we live close to, become aware of our own shortcomings. In a marriage, we, at best, can learn to see in what ways we still need to grow. Counteracting this growth, for example, by idealizing two complementary genders, must be seen as deeply problematic from a theological perspective.

Family and Marriage

The church is often understood as a supporter of the nuclear family, and heterosexual marriage is given a special status by EvL as a blessed covenant that gives birth to new life. However, this is problematic if one considers the early church's way of relating to marriage, reproduction, and family loyalties. In the history of the church, the family has been seen both as a potential competitor to the Christian's whole-hearted loyalty to the

church community, and as a potential idol if the Christian seeks their safety there. The desire to have children has been understood as a sign that a person is still afraid of death and does not fully believe in resurrection and eternal life. The fact that the church has become a defender of the nuclear family is thus remarkable.

The Catholic theologian David Matzko McCarthy sees the family as something essential, while at the same time as being at great risk. According to McCarthy, nowadays the modern nuclear family project is burdened with much that must be considered destructive from a theological perspective. For example, the tendency of the nuclear family to try to be self-sufficient and, above all, to function as a consuming, isolated entity – to be turned inwards – are, in McCarthy's view, significant problems. By being there for others and seeing themselves as dependent on others, family members can act as a community that builds larger communities. In this way, – from a theological point of view – McCarthy believes that many problems of the modern family, can be avoided.

At the same time, the image of the family has been used to describe much in the Christian faith. God is described as a father, the Church as a mother and Christians call each other brothers and sisters. The family has sometimes been called a "domestic church", and the home has been highlighted as a place where a Christian gets to grow in love, patience and forgiveness. In earlier times, having children might have been considered a sign of fear of death (Augustine, Chrysostom), but today it can also be understood as an expression of trust, hope for the future, and an ability to receive God's gifts and release the illusion of control over one's own life (Stanley Hauerwas, Adrian Thatcher). In these ways, the family can play an important role for the church and for the individual Christian.

Concurrent with EvL emphasizing the importance of the family in general, the notion of children as the purpose of marriage has been severely toned down in recent decades, and instead the relationship between spouses has increasingly been described as the main purpose of marriage. Perhaps for pastoral reasons, the church has not wanted to pour salt in the wounds of the involuntarily childless by opening up the idea that their marriage is not a real marriage. A glance at history indicates that this confirmation of the childless marriage can also be understood as a contribution to the debate about what is considered a valid cause for the dissolution or annulment of a marriage.

That marriage "implicitly aims to form a family" is, however, a fundamental thought when EvL expresses its view of marriage. This becomes

especially important as the church tries to put into words what gives heterosexual marriage a special position according to the church's theology. What arises is, nonetheless, a challenging balancing act between a pastoral treatment of childless spouses and a dogmatic treatment of same-sex spouses. I have tried to address some of the problems that arise in this balancing process by looking more closely at voluntarily childless marriages and discussing how these marriages can be understood – and how these spouses may understand themselves – theologically. They do not meet the reproductive expectation placed on spouses of different sexes of childbearing age. Nevertheless, they do live up to the church's notions of heterosexual gender complementarity – at least in theory. This group is, therefore, theologically relevant and interesting when discussing marriage, particularly since many Christian childless spouses describe how their marriage has a different calling than the biologically reproductive one (Helen Stanton, Robert Song, Dawn Llewellyn). How these spouses are perceived by the church also affects how, for example, same-sex spouses can be met.

Another challenge for EvL is how to relate to a view that marriage “implicitly aims to form a family” at the same time as the church's theological reflection on contraception can be called non-existent. Although it is frequently emphasized within EvL that heterosexual marriage can lead to reproduction, a theological reflection on receiving or not receiving children has not been given priority. If questions regarding the possibility of having children and the readiness or willingness to receive children were dealt with more extensively within EvL, other related issues might also benefit. In the history of the church different types of parenting have been known, for example, spiritual parenting. A deeper theological understanding of reproduction beyond the biological creates an opportunity for the church to challenge the boundaries of the nuclear family and to demonstrate a Christian stance where the water of baptism is thicker than blood (Jana Marguerite Bennett, Anna Poulson). With such an emphasis, singleness, celibacy, voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, and spiritual parenting become but different ways of living out the Church's calling to be a single great community where the fellowship in Christ, while not erasing, *relativizes* all other ties.

The celibate has a special task here. Anyone who sees his calling as living in a community not bound by biology serves as a special witness for the church. Celibacy forces the church to be a community beyond family loyalties. Celibacy shows that not all marriages are biologically reproductive. The celibate also shows what is most profoundly true for all people:

that the deepest longing for fellowship can only be met in relationship with God. Through their marriage to Christ, the celibate shows that all Christians, regardless of family situation, stand together in anticipation of their true Bridegroom (Jana Marguerite Bennett, Eugene F. Rogers, Sarah Coakley).

Another important aspect of celibacy is that it reminds all marriages of the condition shared by the celibate: a call to sacrifice (John Behr). This sacrifice does not consist of denying oneself what one wants, but rather, as Ola Sigurdson writes, is found in sacrificing what one does not really want in order to achieve what one really does want. To achieve what we really want, however, we need to be able to sacrifice what stands in the way. To live in marriage is to believe that one is called to sacrifice oneself in relation to another human being in order to grow in love and get to know God.

Holy Matrimony

The question of what a marriage is, is thus difficult to answer, partly because what the church claims to be defining for marriage rarely covers all situations, all people, or indeed all marriages. Marriage is said, for example, to be a lifelong covenant, while at the same time, after a divorce, what was once “a marriage” retains that same name. The fact that it ended does not change the fact that it really was a marriage. Moreover, marriage is often said to be a covenant built on trust and fidelity. Nonetheless, a marriage does not automatically end when one of the spouses fails to live up to this fidelity. Marriage is often said to be a covenant focused on reproduction. At the same time, the church also weds older couples, and in the same way, even those marriages where the spouses prove incapable of having their own, biological children are considered full marriages. The church has no clear and exhaustive definition of what a marriage is. Thus, there seems to be something *apophatic* about marriage: it is easier to say what it is *not* than to come up with watertight definitions. This should not be understood as laziness. The apophatic angle cannot be the starting point and is useful only when one has exhausted one’s exploratory powers. Neither is the apophatic stance a way to avoid conflicts that may arise in the search for definitions. Instead, it calls for openness. As the orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) writes in his book *The Mystic Theology of the Eastern Church* of apophaticism: “It is not a question of removing the contradiction by adapting the dogma to our knowledge; on the other hand, it is about changing our mind so that we can reach the contemplation of the reality which is revealed to us”. The church needs to be able to talk about

what marriage is, yet always strive to maintain the open attitude of the seeker.

The themes discussed in this thesis – such as love, sexuality, gender, children, and family – prove to be in the same need of apophatic thinking: Love exists, but we cannot define what it looks like and what expressions it takes. What marital love looks like is just as difficult to establish. Gender exists, but we cannot theologically define different genders, understand exactly how they relate to each other, or determine some exact criteria for belonging to one rather than the other. Families exist, and are an important image of how Christians relate to one another, and reproduction is closely linked to love, sexuality and gender. At the same time, however, it is difficult to identify the role of biological reproduction and blood ties in the Christian community, and from a theological perspective, it is equally difficult to view one particular family form as better than another. These things are not easily formulated particularly when one strives to be honest about the complexity of reality.

Nevertheless, even though there is something apophatic about marriage and the central themes discussed in this thesis, a church like EvL still needs to say *something*. If the church performs weddings and blesses marriages, then a theology of marriage is needed. Therefore, considering what has been dealt with in this dissertation, I would like to briefly formulate some thoughts on what this theology might look like.

A Christian Marriage?

In Lutheran theology, where marriage has been emphasized as more general than specifically Christian, one has often asked the question of what a marriage is, but not so often the question of what a *Christian* marriage is. If the church only asks what a marriage is, the focus tends to be misplaced: marriage might then be discussed as a concept ("marriage is and always has been ..."), and questions about what constitutes a valid marriage and what criteria should be met for a relationship to be called marriage become the most essential. Although these questions often prove to be important, a church's theology of marriage cannot only be about defining form. Such an attitude – rightly – leads to voices being raised around the darkness that characterizes many heterosexual, church-blessed marriages.

It is understandable that one is focused on defining marriage and its essence; especially in a Lutheran-theological context where often marriage is seen as a gift of creation that the church may bless because, with reference to Genesis, it is believed that God blesses it. *What* God blesses then

becomes an important question in order to be able to determine which covenants the church in turn can bless. At the same time, the Lutheran idea of marriage as something belonging to an earthly order results in certain challenges, for example regarding how one perceives that the church's view of marriage differs from that of the state. Crucially, what happens when "the world" or the state no longer speaks of marriage – should the church continue to do so, and on what grounds?

I claim that there is a lot to be gained from emphasizing what we see when we look at marriage with explicitly Christian eyes. Much has happened since Luther wanted to raise the status of marriage by, for example, talking about marriage as a vocation. In contemporary culture, where for many people neither Christian faith nor marriage is something self-evident, EvL needs a theological language to explain why marriage based on a Christian faith is considered something worthy of the church's blessing.

Much of the marriage discussion today is centered on various attempts to assert that the essence of marriage is preserved. Changing the definitions and forms of marriage is, however, certainly not the worst thing that could happen to either the church or indeed Christian marriage. The mission of marriage is to help people live sanctified lives – lives that all Christians are called to lead. Moreover, marriage can be a response to this calling as long as it takes into account the different forms the marital calling itself might take. It can be argued on good theological grounds that heterosexual marriages, homosexual marriages, childless marriages – and the "marriages" of the celibate and the Church/Christ – can all help people towards the ascetic practice to which they, with their different conditions and orientations, are called.

Back to the Mystery

Although the nuptial image of the relationship between Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5 has often been seen as belonging to a more sacramental understanding of marriage, this image was important to Luther as well. Today, the image is often dismissed, especially with reference to the hierarchy used to describe the relationship between husband and wife. Others see the picture itself as problematic because it is thought to render a gender-neutral understanding of marriage almost impossible because the Church is seen as the (female) bride and Christ as the (male) groom.

The fact that EvL does not view marriage as a sacrament, but nonetheless perceives it as sacramental, has sometimes been used as an argument against the possibility of marrying same-sex couples. Yet, a sacramental

view of marriage that gives way to bridal mysticism is not necessarily an obstacle to a gender-neutral view on marriage.

The Anglican theologian Eugene F. Rogers presents in his *Sexuality and the Christian body: their way into the triune God* (1999) the view that the bridal mystique is central to the church's marrying of same-sex couples. If marriage is understood as completely secular, one can easily become caught up in biological sex and reproduction. Yet, Rogers emphasizes that the church cannot choose to either marry or not marry same-sex couples based on how well these couples succeed in imitating heterosexual relationships. For example, the "liberal" complementarity argument that same-sex spouses may find that they also complement each other is a dubious position. Instead, the church's decision to marry or not to marry same-sex couples must be based on how well these couples can serve as an image for Christ and the Church. The same applies to heterosexual marriages: they have no self-evident justification for marriage other than their ability to resemble the marriage between Christ and the Church. This is crucial in discussing what can be classified as "a true marriage". A true marriage that could be said to represent the innermost essence of marriage has never existed. Nevertheless, a true marriage does exist in an eschatological sense – i.e. that between Christ and His Church. Moreover, if the Church consists of people who "remember what is yet to come", Christians can be said to bear a memory of this true marriage and the wedding feast that one day will be celebrated. Nonetheless, we cannot point to human history to find a true marriage, nor can we say that it exists today.

With reference to Lutheran theology, marriage has in EvL been regarded as part of a natural order. At the same time, a Christian sanctifies their marriage by living under the golden rule – a life made possible through faith. If marriage is seen as an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church, then marriage is sacred. If marriage, despite Luther's theology of love, helps people to grow in love, then it is sacred. The church has every reason to draw such a marriage closer to itself and the local congregation. As expressed in the New Testament, God's commandment that the Christian must love cannot be understood without the congregation, the church. The mystical relationship between marriage and the relationship of Christ and the Church is most evident in the sacrament of Holy Communion. As the church celebrates Holy Communion as part of a wedding ceremony it becomes clear that "a couple belongs primarily to God and the community rather than to themselves alone", as Rogers puts

it. EvL could, therefore, encourage a strengthened, more visible relationship between the wedding ceremony and the mass. This could be done, not merely through a more frequent celebrating of the wedding mass, but rather through inviting the wedding ceremony into the Sunday service.

This undoubtedly poses challenges for EvL who, at least in theory, also bless the marriages entered into by people who do not belong to the church. I believe that the relationship between marital calling and the church's calling needs to be strengthened. The question which then arises is who the church considers to have the authority to call for service and send out. In many ways, this question is a bigger and more decisive theological question concerning marriage for EvL today than the question regarding same-sex couples.

Marriage as Vocation

In Lutheran theology, it has been pointed out that marriage is a calling, a vocation. How this vocation has been understood has varied, and within EvL it has often been considered important to emphasize the "ordinary" marital life as a way of living out one's vocation. The marital calling has then been interpreted primarily from a creation theological point of view. Luther's description of vocation, however, can also be interpreted – as by the Swedish theologian and archbishop, Olof Sundby (1917–1996), – as faith changing the Christian's attitude to their vocation. This means that the vocation is related to both salvation and creation. As far as marriage is concerned, such an interpretation would mean that faith changes the interpretation of one's marital vocation. Based on such an emphasis, vocation is not the same as the task one has in different areas of life, but rather involves a changed way of looking at the task itself. In light of this, the blessing might then be understood as a prayer that the marriage may mean *more*.

When the church performs a wedding ceremony, it blesses the marriage. According to Lutheran theology, it is precisely the blessing that separates a civil marriage from a church marriage. The marriage itself does not change. The marriage itself is no different before or after the blessing. Instead, the blessing might be said to show how one receives marriage as a gift – a gift for which one wishes to express gratitude. The blessing can thereby be said to be a manifestation of the Christian gaze with which a Christian views their marriage.

Those who want to preserve marriage as a covenant between heterosexual couples often speak of the fact that the church can only bless a covenant that God blesses – the covenant between a man and a woman. This attitude,

which one sees as founded in Genesis, is often motivated by reference to the man and woman's ability to reproduce and/or with reference to the gender complementarity that makes the joining together of a man and a woman a unique kind of unity that God blesses and which the church therefore may also bless. On the other hand, those who want the church to bless same-sex marriages too often emphasize love as the thing deserving of God's blessing instead. Of course, the fact that there is some uncertainty about what should be at center when the church decides which relationships are to be blessed makes the discussion even more difficult.

Could a glance at other occasions where the blessing occurs in various church services offer a clue as how to think about the nuptial blessing as well? Baptism, confirmation, the blessing of first graders or young leaders, ordination blessings, the blessings of missionaries, the blessing of the home, the aronitic blessing at the end of each Sunday service... in all cases one could say that people are blessed to serve, they are blessed for a mission. The mission could then be to be a disciple, to go out into the world and serve the Lord with gladness, or to serve through some special calling. Could we understand the nuptial blessing in the same way?

If we consider the Lutheran thought on marriage as a calling, a vocation, and then combine it with the call which all Christians have received – a call to deny themselves, to bear their cross and to sacrifice their lives for their neighbor – then we can have a marriage theology which emphasizes marriage not primarily as a defined form that guarantees us to live out our calling, but rather assists us in doing so.

From that perspective, the nuptial blessing becomes a blessing to service, to mission. The service is to love one's neighbor – their spouse – but it does not end there. With the words from Karl Barth (*Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4):

Marriage would not be marriage were it not for the willingness and readiness to undertake such active participation in the nearer, the more distant and the most distant events of the surrounding contemporary world. Marriage is not permission to establish an egoistic partnership of two persons, but a new and special commitment to such active participation in which it may and must be significant and fruitful, an outward witness and help, as the inner fellowship of these two persons, and in which it may in its own place and manner be a factor in human history. Those who enter marriage may not shrink from this responsibility. And those who wish to live and not languish in marriage will have to take this responsibility in all seriousness.

Marriage is a calling to move outwards: away from one's self, closer to one's neighbor and out into the world. Having children is one way this calling reaches beyond the spouses' mutual community, although the spouses also need to be aware of the risk that the family itself is reduced to primarily being an isolated, closed, and consuming unit. In turn, spouses who do *not* have children need to make sure that they open up their community. If they do, they may have a special opportunity to live a life of prayer and service for others.

That the church blesses marriages can be seen, as so often with blessings, as the church's hope for a "miracle of the bread" – a nuptial miracle. The earthly marriage given in creation; the marriage that people have made use of in so many different times, places, and cultures to keep order of their interpersonal relationships and the consequences of them, *this* marriage may now be blessed and become something *more*: With a Christian gaze, marriage can be seen as a coming together with another human being that challenges our love and makes it grow, and also teaches us something about God's love for us.