RE-THINKING MARRIAGE -- AGAIN

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Heterosexism -- the systemic benefitting of heterosexual persons at the disadvantage of gay men and lesbian women -- lost some of its grip on our church and culture this past winter, if a significant shift in common parlance is any indication. Suddenly the terms "gay marriage" and "lesbian marriage," until recently only cautiously spoken, have appeared regularly in our media, where previously talk had been limited to "same-sex unions" or one of that latter label's cognates. The new language, of course, is the more accurate, for, as is evident to almost any who have ever participated in a discussion of the issue the civil and ecclesiastical sanction and celebration of the unions of homosexual individuals, for most people the real underlying question is that of the nature and purpose of marriage. The linguistic shift the past several months is a telling sign that the church and the society are re-thinking marriage -- again.

There is no better starting-place for such re-thinking than with the scholarship of Kenneth Stevenson, one-time Lecturer in Liturgics on the Faculty of Theology of the University of Manchester, later Rector of the Parish of Holy Trinity and St. Mary's, Guildford, and now Bishop of Portsmouth, England. What follow are my conclusions on the prospect of gay and lesbian marriages after reading Stevenson's *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of the Christian Marriage Rites* (1983) and *To Join Together: The Rite of Marriage* (1987), as well as his compilation, with Mark Searle, of *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy* (1992). Studying this material opens and expands our thinking through the realization that:

Every marriage is different. Perhaps the first thing to acknowledge is that the church has never embraced a single, developed, monolithic view of marriage or its practice. "One of the fascinating features of history," writes Stevenson, "is that marriage liturgies have varied so much" (1987: 5). They have varied geographically: of marriage Martin Luther quoted the proverb, "Many lands, many customs." And they have varied historically: whereas Augustine called marriage not a mere "joining," but a *sacramentum* (mystery, solemn obligation), Cranmer, on the other hand, saw it, not as a sacrament, but as "a holy estate, instituted of God himself."

Such differing understandings existed even at the beginning of our history. The Ancient Near Eastern understandings of fertility, marriage, and passion, depicted in the Bible, were re-framed by Israel in terms of a relationship between God and Israel. Hosea more than any other worked out the imagery of the marriage of God and Israel, and with him we see the focus of marriage shift from *fertility* to *fidelity* (Hos. 4:2: 6:6). Later the use of the term *covenant,* which lay under the surface in Hosea, was made explicit in Malachi (2:14). Then idea that God actually *joins* the couple in a divine blessing on them was an innovation of the second century B.C. Book of Tobit (7:12ff.).

What Israel understood about its relationship with God was re-interpreted by the church in terms of its relationship between Jesus, referred to as a bridegroom, and Christian believers, or between Christ and the church (Mt. 9:15/Mk. 2:19/Lk. 5:34; Rev. 19:6ff). The New Testament reflects a conventional Jewish liturgical practice of which our own is the reverse -- that of *women* accompanying the *groom* in procession to the home of the *bride* (Mt. 25:1-13). At a wedding in Cana of Galilee, before the groom pronounced the Seven Blessings traditional in Judaism (for creation, the creation of humankind, Zion, the barren one, the couple, with reference to the Garden of Eden, the joy of the couple, and the qualities of married life, with reference to the marriage feast), Jesus blessed the new wine, a sign of the eschatological and ecclesiological importance of marriage as one of the founding relationships of the new covenant (John 2:1-11). Paul, too, understood marriage eschatologically and ecclesiologically, contending that in anticipation of a wedding yet to come Christians now are *betrothed* to Christ (2 Cor.

11:2).

Judaism in the Common Era had its own developments, some of which influenced the emerging understanding of marriage in Christian circles. The Talmudic literature of the 3rd century C.E. reflects earlier Jewish practices, including the distinguishing between betrothal and marriage; the avoidance of fast days for the celebration of a marriage; the wearing of crowns by both the bride and the groom; the procession by the bride, accompanied by her companions, to a feast at the house of the groom; a contract between the couple written at the threshold of the groom's house according to set formulas; and the Seven Blessings, pronounced by the groom. In post-Talmudic Judaism the blessings were said by the rabbi, and the contract and blessings were done, not in the groom's home, but under a canopy, symbolizing the groom's house. Sometimes the lines of influence ran in the other direction: in the mediaeval Jewish wedding, influenced by Christian practice, the betrothal and marriage were gradually brought together, and a ring (or coin) was given.

Further twists and turns mark the patristic and mediaeval periods. The practice of hand-laying, as well as that of crowning, is attested as early as Ephraem the Syrian (306-373). The arguments that it is the consent between the couple, not their co-habitation, which makes the marriage, and that the couple should wear crowns, symbols of their victory over passion, to their marriage bed are evidenced by John Chrysostom (c. 347-407). Stevenson cites the work of both Basilius Binder, who pointed out the great variety of local marriage rites in the Middle Ages (1987: 27), and Korbinian Ritzer, who in his study of the marriage rite in the first millenium, showed that the Gregorian Sacramentary only barely masked local differences.

The Reformation occasioned yet more re-thinking. Not unconnected to the fact that he nearly lost his job for being married before the official split with Rome in 1534, Thomas Cranmer held to a completely reformed marriage rite in pre-medieval guise. He spoke of the "solemnization of matrimony," not a sacrament. His Prayer Book rite was to take place in two parts, the first in the nave, the place of the contract, and the second in the sanctuary, leading into the Eucharist. In his rite the ring was to be placed on the book, but it is not to be blessed until it was placed

on the left hand of the bride. The priest was no longer to have a sacramental role, but instead was to witness the exchange of vows and give the blessing, in no sense "joining" the couple. The centrality of consent -- both as an answer to a question asked by a priest and as a vow made by both partners -- was to be maintained, but the blessing was demoted to the point where it was only a form of intercession.

Re-thinking and change have continued into our own period. While in the medieval and Reformation rites women had to promise to obey their husbands, in the 1928 American prayer book that requirement disappeared and the woman was asked if she wanted to marry the man *before* that same question is asked of the man -- a way of introducing the equality of the sexes. In the 1960's, Vatican II upheld the Tridentine principle of permitting local variation in the marriage liturgy and ended the practice of prohibiting marriages in Lent and "mixed marriages." In 1969, French Roman Catholics published a rite in which the woman and man recited parts of their vows together and, in the nuptial blessing, prayers were offered for both partners without differentiating their gender roles in a way which would be incongruous in modern French society (1987: 152). If the tradition does not agree on what to call the service, whether a "veiling" or a "solemnizing" or a "blessing" or a "celebration," we are similarly confused today.

The creation of a prayer book rite, moreover, is no guarantee of uniform standardization, for, as Stevenson argues, "when a liturgy is printed, it learns new ways of being flexible; and when a rite is evolving continuously, new features deliberately introduced usually express new perceptions of what is going on" (1987: 87). Try as we might on the level of what Aidan Kavanagh calls "secondary theology" to create a single, universal understanding of marriage, on the level of the "primary theology" experienced by real people living real lives, great variation prevails. Why? Because "every marriage," Stevenson observes, "is about the way couples share in the love of God, every marriage is the same and yet every marriage is different" (1987: 20). In light of the historical data marshalled by not only Stevenson, but also John Boswell in *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe,* our present re-thinking has opened us to the understanding that gay and lesbian couples, too, "share in the love of God," and therefore,

however seemingly "different," their relationships, too, are worthy of being called "marriages" and celebrated as such.

Anyone can marry. Thinking to defend marriage as they understand it, many people practice "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy. in order to keep gay and lesbian relationships clandestine and "in the closet." But, as Stevenson points out, the history of the Middle Ages in the West is one continuous story of legislation and pressure against clandestine relationships -- which means that many folks simply lived together and did not think it necessary to come to church and avail themselves of the church's blessing in marriage. The canonical reforms of the eleventh century were aimed primarily at men of property and power, for the protection of their women and children, and merely de-legitimated, but did not prevent, clandestine marriages or marriages by co-habitation. Among the lower classes, particularly, at least until the sixteenth-century reforms by Protestants and Catholics, people frequently married without the benefit of clergy. If, in fact, a distinction can be drawn between the "blessing of the church" and "marriage by co-habitation." (Stevenson: 1987: 28; 1992: 260), can it not be argued that many gay and lesbian couples already have, in their clandestine relationships, "marriage by co-habitation"?

If, indeed, the church now moves toward celebrating the marriages of gay men and lesbian women, it will probably be because it has come to a new understanding of the validity of their pre-existing "marriages" or "marriages by co-habitation." Here, too, Stevenson is helpful. The prayers at a marriage, he notes, pass directly from anamnesis to intercession without any epiclesis invoking the Holy Spirit precisely because the nuptial blessing is a blessing on a marriage which is already in place through the consent offered each other by the couple. Marriage, itself, writes Stevenson, "is the first, original blessing bestowed by God on humankind, a blessing which has survived the fall and vicissitudes of history, with couples taking up their divine vocation, a way of life ordained by God and sanctified by submission to God's plan for the creation" (1992: 264). Rite, for him, is "the primal means for Christians to cope with reality," and "any theology of marriage must arise from reflected experience,

mediated through liturgy" (1983:213). Looking back historically, it is apparent to him that the rites "were not the work of theologians or canonists, but of anonymous and long-dead pastors whose apt invocations in the context of marriage survived to accompany and interpret and partially transform the old, inherited ways of doing things ... Liturgy is always a moment of decision, when the theorizing has to end and the ideal has to yield to the practical: something has to be said and something has to be done. These documents witness to what nameless believers have found to say about marriage in the concrete, about the life and relationship that is opening up before this couple, and about the sacramentum ... not an ideal, but a given reality." (1992: 261). "We are well into an age," he asserts, "when theology and human experience are responding in fruitful dialogue, so that when the Church formulates a theology or a liturgy it does so on the basis of reflection upon the human condition. What is said or celebrated is, in some sense, a critique of what ordinary people live by." (1987: 5). Therefore, he says, "anyone can marry" (1987: 232) -- including, presumably, gay men and lesbian women.

Re-thinking the distinction between marriage and the blessing of same-sex unions. If it is only very recently that the terms "gay marriage" and "lesbian" marriage" have entered common parlance, it is because many, sensitive to what they saw to be the politically controversial nature of any discussion of gay and lesbian marriages, have endeavored to distinguish between marriages of heterosexual individuals, on the one hand, and the blessings of homosexual ones, on the other. There are five problems with this distinction, the first four of which arise from reading Stevenson.

First, Stevenson argues, this practice of "blessing" cannot be defended on theological grounds, for offering a blessing is, theologically, performing exactly the same thing as a full wedding service. "Those who defend the 'blessing,'" he contends, "are relying, in part, on a warped scholasticism, which abrogates responsibility for the vows, and separates vows and blessing in a way which is not part of a wholesome view of the marriage liturgy itself; vows and blessing are distinct, but they belong together, the one is the consequence of the other, the two flow into each other as expressing not just the inner meaning of the *rite* but the inner meaning of the

relationship under God" (1983: 212).

Secondly, as used in services for the blessing of a civil marriage often appended to the marriage rites in twentieth-century prayer books for couples who, because of divorce, have been denied marriage in the church, the term "blessing" carries a discriminatory connotation against those whom the church deems unworthy of its sacrament of marriage. A "blessing," is used in such contexts as an optional, dispensable, non-essential offered as a substitute to those denied the real thing -- mere frosting on the wedding cake. Indeed, for many centuries the blessing by the clergy seems to have been something rather like the blessing of a house today: a privilege sought by the devout rather than an obligation incumbent upon all, and originally it was urged upon the couple only if the groom were a member of the clergy.

Thirdly, if the blessing is the only "performative act" of the rite, the focus is on the priest, who pronounce the blessing, and not on the couple who offer their consent through the exchange of vows. The origins of the marriage blessing goes back to Talmudic Judaism, where a short *berakah* or prayer blessing God was recited to ratify the betrothal by money, contract, or the co-habitation of the couple (1987: 13). But it was only in the ninth century that Constantinople ruled that the marriage liturgy, conducted by the clergy, would henceforth become the *only* way of marrying recognized by the church as valid (Stevenson: 1992: 254). Thus the human consent of the couple came to be seen as preliminary, and the divine blessing by the priest, central, to the rite: if the couple's consent was central, after all, what was the priest to do? The solemn nuptial blessing became the climax of the liturgy, accompanied in the East by crowns and in the West by the veiling of the bride. The argument is sometimes advanced that if a priest can bless houses, boats, fields, and animals, surely a priest can bless a gay or lesbian couple. But are such couples only receptive, passive objects of sacerdotal ministrations -- like houses, fields etc.? To give no recognition in rites for "the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions" to the couple's vows is to fail to recognize the validity of their relationship and commitment, as can be seen from the fact that, though in the medieval West the nuptial blessing was the first and earliest part of the marriage liturgy, it eventually gives way to the consent of the partners as the rite identified by scholastic theologians as the only truly performative act: *consensus facit nuptius* (consent makes

the marriage). Thus, if there is only a priest's divine blessing, and no consent on the part of the human couple, no marriage has occurred, the relationship of the couple is regarded as inferior to those of opposite-sex couples, and the society's heterosexism, sanctioned by the church's heterocentrism, can be maintained..

Fourthly, it makes no sense for the church to deny gay and lesbian couples marriage for the reason that marriage is, if only in part, for procreation, and then offer them as a substitute a blessing, which has been closely related, at least historically, to the fruitfulness of the woman and the procreation of children. In the sacramentaries the blessing was almost exclusively for the bride and constitiutes a sort of consecration of the woman to a new change of state in the married life. Augustine repeatedly alluded to Genesis 1:8, and to the connection between the blessing of Adam and Eve and the procreation of children; the divine blessing of marriage was understood to be the fruitful procession of children (1987: 23). He further mentioned the *tabulae matrimoniales* (marriage tablets), which the bishops wrote down and read aloud at a marriage liturgy, always mentioning "the procreation of children." It is illogical to deny marriage to gay and lesbian couples on the grounds that marriage's purpose is the procreation of children and then substitute for a full marriage a mere blessing originally tied to procreation.

Finally, as Nathaniel Pierce pointed out to me, in the Episcopal Church today a priest blesses a couple, not their union, the "Blessing of a Same-Sex *Union*" is not possible. The phrases from the marriage rite in the 1979 Prayer Book make it clear that it is the two individuals, not their union, which is blessed: " ... pour out the abundance of your blessing upon this man and this woman" (page 430), or "... send therefore your blessing upon these your servants" (page 431). The phrase, "The Blessing of Same-Sex Unions," contradicts this tradition and understanding.

Re-thinking the purposes of marriage. Since the time of Augustine until the Reformation, the church taught that marriage had three purposes: *fides* (fidelity) *proles* (offspring), and *sacramentum* (mystery or solemn obligation). In the introduction to the marriage rite in the first

Book of Common Prayer (1549), Cranmer also presented three, somewhat different, reasons for marriage, the three which had occurred in the Parson's Tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales:* marriage was first for the procreation of children, then for a remedy against sexual frustration, and finally for companionship. But Martin Bucer, commenting on Cranmer's 1549 rite, argued that "three causes for matrimony are enumerated, that is children, a remedy, and mutual help, and I should prefer what is placed third among the causes for marriage might be in the first place, because it is first." It was not until the Canadian prayer book of 1959, however, that the three reasons came in a different order, with procreation in second place. Then in the 1975 draft of the English book Cranmer's third reason was put first, thus at last taking up Bucer's suggestion that the companionship aspect of marriage be listed as primary and most important. The 1976 draft proposed American book followed suit. Thus, while Cranmer saw in marriage above all the procreation of children, our modern rites emphasize the significance of relationship and the joys of sexuality. According to our present re-thinking, companionship takes precedence over procreation, and fidelity over fertility.

A similar kind of re-thinking about the purposes of marriage has gone on in Roman Catholic circles. In the Leonine sacramentary, though marriage had been seen as a union that is blessed in its own right as a means of knowing and loving God in a relationship, that relationship is seen as religious as well as social, and the primary emphasis is on for the procreation of children (1987: 30). Then, while the Leonine text prayed for the bride to attain heavenly promises *after* the production of children, the Gregorian text inverted the order, perhaps implying that children are not quite so central to a good marriage (1987: 33). Finally, in our own time, in the Vatican II rite, marriage came to be seen, in this order of priority, as (1) a way of sharing in the love of Christ and the Church, (2) a covenant of fidelity and procreation that is indissoluble, (3) a bond in which the partners stick together in good times and bad, and (4) a way of producing children for the continuation of humankind and the enrichment of the Church (1987: 136).

If, indeed, marriage is principally for companionship, and not procreation, then gay and lesbian couples are able, indeed, often in exemplary ways, to fulfil the primary purpose of marriage, and the reason of opening the sacrament of marriage to them is greatly strengthened.

Re-thinking the nature of marriage. For the first time in the history of the prayer book marriage rites, in the 1979 American book marriage is called a "covenant." Charles Price once told me that, to the best of his recollection as a member of the committee which draft the 1979 book, the term was borrowed from that prayer in the *Liber Usualis* which was later adopted in the 1979 book for the Collect for the First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord, and thence was used in the marriage rite, too, in order to make clear that the marriage covenant is a way of living out our baptismal covenant. But I have yet to find anyone who is absolutely certain about how in the Episcopal Church this new understanding of the nature of marriage as a covenant arose. There is a precedence in Anglicanism for the use of the term "covenant" for marriage in Charles Wheatly*'s Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* (London: 1720), a didactic account of the 1662 rite from a High Church divine. Certainly, in the second half of the twentieth-century Roman Catholics began to talk of marriage as a covenant, rather than as a contract. Perhaps the term was attractive because, both biblical and patristic in origin, it seemed to provide a genuine way forward for both Roman Catholics and Protestants trying to find common ecumenical ground in an increasingly alien society. Or perhaps the term made sense because, far more than a contract, with its individualistic connotation, marriage seen as a covenant carried an ecclesial nature. Indeed, as early as 1963, Schillebeeckx, the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, argued for the use of the term covenant as a way of restoring the ecclesiology of marriage:

> *Covenant ... places the right balance of emphasis on God, the couple, and the rest of the Church. Covenant emphasizes both the 'objective' side of marriage as an act of God in the Christian assembly by two people, as well as the 'subjective' side of marriage as a mystery of life in which the partners, their friends, and relatives have to grow in a life-long union. Covenant is a theme that stands up better to biblical scrutiny than contract, because, as we have seen, contract is only one aspect of marriage, whereas covenant can be applied to the whole relationship as something that is changing, dynamic, and full of what Michael Ramsey once described as "an adventure.* (1987: 118-119)

In the final draft of the marriage rite promulgated by Vatican II on March 17, 1967, marriage was seen as a covenant of fidelity and procreation which is indissoluble (1987: 136). But, in actual fact, "the contractual emphasis of medieval and post-medieval times has given way," Stevenson contends, "to the covenantal view, and both are now superseded by the grander ideal of marriage as *ecclesial,* of the couples forming a 'mini-Church' that is also part of the wider Church.'" (1987: 232).

Marriage, moreover, is *covenantal*, and therefore *ecclesial*, and precisely because it is *baptismal.* Such was the case in the early church, where the sacramentality of marriage as a state depended not on the wedding rite, but on the baptismal identity of the couple. Theirs was considered a "Christian marriage," or a marriage contracted and lived "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39), because it was a marriage between two baptized believers in Christ. According to Stevenson, the "renewal of Christian marriage was inseparable from the renewal of baptismal consciousness and the profound consequences which flow therefrom for both the life of the family and the church itself." Thus, the church's theology of marriage started with the baptismal foundations of "marriage in Christ." The couple's life together was a form of the Christian life, carried out in mutual love and service, "iconicizing" -- to use Stevenson's language -- the mutual relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:21-33).

To be *ecclesial* the marriage became iconicizing, which meant that it referred less to the future hopes of the couple than to the memories of the community of their ancestor couples -- Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Tobit and Sarah, Joachim and Anna, Zachary and Elizabeth. Thus, the whole succession of generations was summed up in the bridal pair, who in a sense become Adam and Eve, etc. The couple became more than themselves, icons of the holy nation wedded to God, icons of Christ and the church.. (Stevenson: 1992, 253, 263, 271). Whereas the western rites stressed the contractual and legal aspects of marriage and linked it with the Eucharist, the eastern rites linked it with baptism by employing the Red Sea theme and by emphasizing marriage as (1) an experience of redemption, (2) an extension of baptism, (3) a vocation in the Kingdom within the church, (4) an ecclesial action presided over by a presbyter. Thus the eastern rites continued to see marriage as a

passage from one stage to another through the phases of "separation," "liminality," and "incorporation." -- as delineated by VanGennep of the initiation rites -- whereas the western rites moved further and further away from that concept. (1987: 38, 154)

The 1979 prayer book rite evidences an attempt to recover the ecclesial emphasis of the ancient and eastern church. Thus at marriage, just as at baptism, the individuals can be "presented" for marriage by family and representatives of the congregation, and the service for "the Anniversary of a Marriage" in the Book of Occasional Services offers an opportunity to follow up on the sacrament of marriage, as in the mystagogia which is part of the initiation rite. Much more, of course, could be done to emphasize the ecclesial nature of marriage. By phasing marriage we could achieve a kind of "catechumenal" time in which marriage would be seen, not as a private business or an "occasional office," but as the prayer of the whole church. After the marriage liturgy the marriage continues, and there could well be more in the way of a kind of mystagogia for newly married couples in a congregation, with couples gathering for enrichment sessions, with the recently married prayed for in the eucharistic bidding prayers, with the possibility for couples to renew their vows at special liturgies, and with an invitation for couples to come to the eucharist and be recognized and prayed for on their anniversaries (1987: 226ff);

The point, of course, is that the nature of marriage is ultimately baptismal, and thereby covenantal, and thereby ecclesial, with the couple forming a "mini-church" as a way of living out their baptismal covenant within the whole church. Myriads of gay and lesbian couples throughout the ages have established in their relationships such "mini-churches," and, if such is the nature of marriage, then the church -- the *ecclesia* -- ought to extend to gay and lesbian couples the sacrament of marriage.

Re-thinking the "initiatory" shape of the marriage liturgy. Stevenson argues that the three stages which Van Gennep identified in the "deep structure" or "shape" of the initiation rites -- "separation," "liminality," and "incorporation" -- are equally true of the marriage rite. and

should be adopted as a *norm* for marriage. In marriage, as in baptism, the couple, like catechumens, with the prayers and support of the whole church make a passage from one stage to another. Even in the present marriage rite of the Episcopal Church the remnant of this "deep structure" is displayed architecturally as the liturgical actions moves through three stages from (1) the door of the church to (2) the nave, and thence to (3) the altar. But much more could be done to structure the couple's passage temporally by having distinct rites for their separation from their pasts at their betrothal, engagement, the liminal period during the time of their engagement, and their incorporation at the time of their wedding itself. The betrothal could be a true rite of separation. During the liminal period there could be public prayers for the couple and a preparation by means of blessing of their wedding clothes and their bedchamber. Marriage liturgies, therefore, could "phase" through experience (1987: 7ff.).

Re-thinking the consequences for the ceremonial of the marriage liturgy. As the Episcopal Church undertakes the development of a new marriage rite, in order both to enrich the rite and to broaden its ecumenical foundation, consideration might be given to the recovery of the following meaningful and ancient customs: (1) Placing on the heads of the couple crowns, signifying both the crowns of the martyrs who were faithful to each other unto death, making up what there is to be made up of Christ's sufferings, and the crowns of victory over destructive passions (1992: 268). (2) Tying a special cord or lasso around the couple to symbolize their binding, as in the Visigothic rites. (3) Accompany the betrothal "pledge" or *arrhas* with the exchange of two rings, as outlined in the *Liber Ordinum* (1987:47). (4) Anointing the couple to symbolize, not just their messianic powers of the kingdom for the sake of their marriage as a vocation, but also, as in Jesus' anointing at Bethany, preparation for a death to the old in order to be born anew. (5) Drinking the *henana,* a mixture of water, wine, and ash in a chalice, symbolizing death to an old relationship in order to come to life in a new. (6) Joining the right hands of the couple, but, to avoid any clerical implications in the act, without wrapping their hands with a priest's stole. (7) Robing the couple in special vestments. (8) Placing a canopy or pall over the couple during the nuptial blessing as a sign of the presence of God and the concern

of the congregation. (8) Cutting a piece of hair from the groom's head and placing it on the brides, and then vice versa (9) Having the couple walk three times around the church before departing, (10) Having candles carried by the couple. (11) Having the couple do the "dance of Isaiah." (12) Having the couple give a Bible or Prayer Book or a cross to each other. (1987: 74).

Stevenson, in addition, making innovative suggestions for the marriage ceremonial, recommends that we: (1) Have an ecclesial, instead of a bridal, procession, including the bride and groom, the wedding party, members of the families, the acolytes, crucifer, and all ministers of the liturgy. (2) Have the couple say their own vows, rather than following the priest line by line, to avoid any clerical emphasis. (4) Sing a hymn when the couple reaches the head of the nave. (5) Decorate the chairs for the couple with flowers. (6) Use three lessons, including new ones such as thanksgiving texts and psalmic chant. (7) Include good marriage hymns, more of which need to be written, and not just hymns about love which can be sung at marriages (8) Avoid having the couple kneel when the priest to declares them married. (9) Include the exchange of other gifts at the time of the giving and receiving of rings. (10) Have the priest stretch her/his arms towards the couple for the nuptial blessing, which should be preceded by a profound silence and then sung or chanted.

Questions for yet more re-thinking. Stevenson raises the following questions which might fruitfully be investigated as the Episcopal Church undertakes the development of a new marriage rite: (1) Who does the marriage? Are the couple, as we are accustomed to thinking and teaching, the "ministers of the sacrament"? If so, is the liturgy really corporate and ecclesial? (2) Where should the nuptial blessing occur and what is its relationship to other blessings in the rite? (3) Should the marriage take place in the church or in "some other appropriate place" (BCP page 423) or "in some other convenient place" (BCP page 435)? Is the lovemaking at home seen as a blessing of God? If so, should part of the rite be done in the home? (4) Do the present lections, which reflect little more than the cultural milieu of the Bible on marriage, help us very much today? Are there other lections which might offer a more theological view of marriage? Is there can inner coherence between the lections and the prayers in the rite? (5) Do the prayers

cohere? (6) How ecumenical is the rite? (7) What about the relation of the church and secular law in marriage? (8) Do the rites take into account the fact that in marriage the couple die to one life in order to embrace another? How can the rites account for marriage's hidden and darker sides? (9) What would a fuller non-eucharistic marriage liturgy look like? (5) How can we ritualize marriage after divorce by adding a simple rite of penitence (perhaps one which might be used by all persons entering marriage)? (6) How can we encourage more active participation in the liturgy by the couple and the congregation? (7) How can we emphasize the role of the Spirit at marriage as we have at baptism and eucharist? (8) How can we expand the introduction to the rite to emphasize that fidelity is not just a matter of maintaining an indissoluble union, but is part of the freedom God gives God's children to renew the marriage commitment every day?

Conclusion. In the past quarter of a century the Episcopal Church, according to its critics, has been "obsessed with sex." True, approximately twenty-five years ago the Episcopal Church first broached the then impolite subject and gingerly began to talk about "human sexuality." That discussion in time led to increasingly candid conversation about "homosexuality," primarily as a pastoral and civil rights issue, and, eventually, much more recently, about "heterosexism," principally as an ethical issue of justice in the face of systemic and institutionalized prejudice and discrimination sanctioned by the church's heterocentrism. Now once again the nature of the debate is shifting, first in this locale, and then in that, and apparent are the first signs of a new springtime in which the Episcopal Church is not so much "obsessed with sex" as it is "focused on marriage." Much remains to be done. But the re-thinking is underway -- again. And this is cause for rejoicing. "For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land" (Song of Sol. 3:11-12).