

St. Augustine and the Scriptural Vision of Married Love

Cole Hartin
Wycliffe College

Abstract

This paper begins by using Augustine's vision of marriage as presented in his work *The Excellence of Marriage*, along with the canonical scriptural vision of marriage as two loci for evaluating the current theologies of matrimony present in Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. First, this paper examines Augustine's vision of marriage situated within his context of debate with thinkers such as Jovinian and Jerome. The paper then critically evaluates this vision of love in view of the portrayal of marriage within the whole canon of Christian Scripture. It argues that, while Augustine clearly sets forth much of this scriptural vision, he leaves behind the distinctive biblical vision of married love. Next, the paper addresses the Roman Catholic and Anglican heirs of the Augustinian tradition, noting where their official teachings on love coalesce with the vision presented by Augustine, and where they depart. Special note is given to the way both churches have more recently tended toward the more biblical vision of married love while at the same time moving away from Scripture with respect to other facets of an Augustinian vision of marriage. Finally, the paper proposes some possible explanations for this departure from Scripture typified by Augustine before moving to a constructive account of the return to Christian marital love.

Introduction

St. Augustine is a polarizing figure. It is no surprise, then, that his writing on marriage is also polarizing. While he suggests that offspring, fidelity, and sacramentality are goods of marriage, he does not give any space for love. Nevertheless, slavishly following Augustine or simply dismissing him is irresponsible. Rather, careful theologians ought to be able to appreciate Augustine's theology, even if that appreciation includes critical evaluation or disagreement. The aim of this

paper is to look critically at Augustine's work on marriage in hopes of retrieving the richness he has to offer, while also drawing focus to one area in which he is missing an important element of marriage: love.

In his book, *Creation and Covenant*, Christopher Roberts traces, from the Fathers to the present, the attitudes that key Christian thinkers have had toward sexual difference. In dealing with Augustine, Roberts offers a sympathetic account, touching on the famous three goods of marriage, but also noting some of Augustine's ideas that have been overlooked.¹ As Roberts offers a comprehensive and faithful account of Augustine in this respect, it becomes clear that while his thoughts on marriage are at once insightful and perhaps troubling, for Augustine, mutual love does not play a significant role in marriage. This is noteworthy because Augustine's view of marriage is not representative of his time: his contemporaries, in fact, developed a love-based view of marriage drawn from Scripture. This departure from his contemporaries is the result of an incomplete vision of the wholeness of Scripture's witness on the subject of marriage.²

This paper traces a scriptural vision of marital love along with Augustine's own formulation, which has laid the trackwork for subsequent Christian traditions. Ultimately, it aims to account for some possible explanations for this Augustinian departure from a more direct scriptural theology before moving to a constructive account of a return to Christian marital love.

In his treatise, *The Excellence of Marriage*, Augustine spares very few words on the place of love within Christian marriage.³ In so doing, Augustine takes a decidedly different tack from the witness of the both the Old and New Testaments. Now many centuries after his death, Christian traditions influenced by Augustine (both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, for example) have returned to a vision of Christian marital love that is more confluent with the scriptural vision than Augustine's, though his thinking on the other goods of marriage have been immensely influential. Further, while Augustine has often been viewed as one of the luminaries of Western theology (and sometimes tragically so), this paper

1 Roberts notes that friendship is one of Augustine's other goods of marriage, one that is not given much attention. See Christopher Chenault Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 52.

2 For one example of a scriptural vision of marital love, see St. John Chrysostom's homily on Eph 5:22–33 in St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 43–64. While there has been a lack of systematic reflection on Christian marital love, one notable exception is John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). While Witte does not tackle the subject of marital love head on, his tracing of the legal development of marriage in the Western world informs questions about love quite nicely.

3 St. Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage in Marriage and Virginity*, trans. Ray Kearney, ed. David G. Hunter (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1999), 33–64.

argues that Augustine represents a breach in the Western Christian tradition insofar as he moves away from the scriptural vision of marital love.⁴

Before Augustine

Augustine's vision of marriage will remain obfuscated so long as it is detached from the Christian tradition preceding him. To fully understand it, one must first look at the earliest Christian reflections on the subject as well as Augustine's cultural context.

Because of its normative weight in the Christian community, Christian Scripture is a fitting starting place for understanding how marital love ought to look.⁵ From this early vantage point, we can see a vision of marital love that is at once recognizable and evolving. I will be treating Christian Scripture as a united whole, not least because this was generally how it was read in the Church prior to the Reformation, but also because it was how Augustine himself understood Scripture.⁶ Within the whole of Scripture's complex vision, marriage is portrayed as unitive, stabilizing, erotic, requiring commitment, aiding in fidelity, sacramentally reflecting Christic love, and finally, procreative. I will refer to texts of Scripture that illustrate these elements.

I will be examining texts of Scripture that are descriptive of the figure of marital love in some general sense. Even specific marriages, such as the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, can be illustrative of married love in a broader sense, so I will include both prescriptive and illustrative texts. For the sake of brevity, I must be selective, but will examine texts from across the biblical canon, including Old and New Testaments, and varying genres. As I noted above, I am assuming that Scripture is a theologically united whole, despite the differentiation one sees in its various parts. Michael Cameron points out that this was the standard way ancient interpreters approached the Bible. He suggests, "Scripture for them was first of all a divine unity, mysterious but accessible, mediated through a wild variety of

4 For one recent example of Eastern Orthodox animosity toward Augustine's reading of Romans, for example, see David Bentley Hart, "Traditio Deformis," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 253 (2015): 71–72.

5 When I refer to "Christian Scripture" I am referring to the Old and New Testaments as they have been received by the Church. For Augustine, this also included some books now deemed deuterocanonical. Because Augustine reads them as a united witness, I will do the same. I will say more about this methodological move below.

6 For the claim that Scripture was read as a unified and authoritative collection of writing, see Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3. Augustine was able to view Scripture as a united whole because he saw the Old Testament as figuring the new, so that Christ's words were spoken and heard in both Testaments. See St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), III.5; and St. Augustine, *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. Felicitas Corrigan (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1960), 13. Note that Augustine viewed Scripture not to be united merely as one continuous narrative, but theologically united as the words of Christ from Christ, and thus serving as a coherent witness to him.

earthly voices, genres, events, teachings, and even contradictions, all of which were kaleidoscopic variations of a single divine picture.”⁷ Based on the premise held by Augustine and his contemporaries that the theological vision of Scripture is united, it follows that when it speaks of marital love, for example, it presents a coherent vision of the same.⁸ The interpreter should consult the whole of Scripture in light of Christ to most comprehensively understand its figures, which in this case, is the figure of marital love. Because we are reading the Bible theologically, trying to understand the figure of married love in light of Christ, Scripture is not merely an historical text, but a normative one, addressing the struggling Christian community in the present.⁹ This is to avoid suggesting the Bible presents some a-historical, timeless truth, on the one hand, or that it is simply an interesting relic of the past, on the other. Because the Bible is God’s communication, it addresses God’s people throughout time even with its historical particularity.

Beginning then, with the book of Genesis, one sees God ordaining the union of man and wife as they bind themselves together; from this basis, one sees the contours of a marriage relationship continue to develop within the larger scriptural framework.¹⁰ In Genesis, we see the unitive character of marriage, the

7 Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15. On the unity of Scripture, see also Augustine, *Augustine’s Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Eric Antone Plumer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95.

8 This is not to say that the figure of marriage in Scripture will not be differentiated, but that the manifold references to marriage will share a common vision. The logic behind such a conviction also comes from a belief in divine providence that asserts that Scripture communicates what God intends it to. Vernon White, in an elucidating discussion of God’s radical transcendence, is useful for illuminating the witness of Scripture. Authorial intention is not a zero-sum game between God, the human authors, redactors, scribes, etc. White notes, “God is in a position always to re-frame temporal events to give them new (redemptive) meaning. It is a construal which means we are conceiving a dimension in which events in history can always be brought into new relations with other events (historical and eternal) to give them such meaning. In particular, it means that all events could be redeemed by being brought into a new relation specifically with the event of Christ . . .” Vernon White, *Purpose and Providence: Taking Soundings in Western Thought, Literature and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 132. God, then, preserves the integrity of its human contributors to Scripture while using those contributions to his own ends. This is a theological rather than an historical argument.

9 I am echoing Childs here. See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 86–87.

10 I have decided to set aside discussions on historical-critical reconstructions and redactions that may be helpful in some areas of biblical studies. While not insensitive to the human authors of the text, I will approach the Bible canonically, which is how Augustine reads it. See *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.8–9, for a discussion of Augustine’s visions of canon. By focusing on the overall shape of the canon and thus seeing it as a united witness, I am interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New, and vice versa. Looking at the theology of marriage from a discrete period in Israel’s history (e.g. the patriarchal age) and reading it outside of the finalized form of the canon may create tensions around the parameters of married love (e.g. it may be inclusive of polygamy). Though they may be fruitful for exploration, for the sake of this essay I will leave these tensions aside.

two-becoming-one, and the fruitfulness that flows from this (Gen 2:24). The first marriage is also shown to be the cure for loneliness, with man not finding a suitable “helper as his partner” (Gen 2:20) and woman being formed from “what was taken from the man” (Gen 2:21).¹¹ Love is not explicitly brought into the picture, but is implicitly present in the way the first marriage joins two for mutual completion and community. Furthermore, the Genesis texts are referenced and reiterated by Christ in Mark 10:1–10 and Matt 19:1–9. They stand over the rest of the Bible as a general standard of what marriage is, though the accidents of each marriage are as different as the men and women who make them. That is to say, though many marriages in the Old Testament take on their own particular texture, filled with brokenness and hope, the normative picture of marriage involves two becoming one for mutual support.¹²

In Exodus, this unitive purpose of marriage is taken for granted in the renewal of God’s covenant with Israel (Exod 34). The Lord speaks to Israel, commanding them to drive out the inhabitants from the promised land, warning Israel that they are forbidden to make a covenant with the people from other nations. The Lord declares that such a covenant will lead to Israel taking “wives from among their daughter for [their] sons,” so that “their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make [Israel’s] sons also prostitute themselves to their gods” (Exod 34:16). This sentiment is reiterated throughout the Pentateuch, namely, that marriage is unitive in its character, and the effect of this is that marriage to idolaters will distort the faith of Israel. Prohibiting exogamies is a negative means of indicating the nature of marriage as a drawing together of two into one.

The Levitical laws surrounding marriage also bring further insight to married love. The various sexual and marital prohibitions help to narrow and separate what the author sees to be God’s intent for marriage from other uses of marriage and sexuality (see Lev 18–21). Though the narrator conveys that “the Lord spoke to Moses” (Lev 18:1), the role of Leviticus has been questioned throughout its reception as has been the regulative weight it bears on the Christian Church. For example, Article 7 in the Book of Common Prayer notes that “although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from

11 All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

12 On marriage in the Old Testament, see Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 31–56; and Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones *God, Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 31–60.

the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.”¹³ The distinction between what is “moral” and “ceremonial” may be contestable, but the fact remains that the Levitical portrayal of sexuality and marriage shaves off the possibility of sexual expression in various extra-marital situations. These expressions of sexuality or love outside of the normative bonds of marriage portrayed in Genesis bring clarity about the purpose of marriage by way of negative perversions of the same.

In Genesis, Eve is presented as providing help and stability to Adam, but this is contrasted in the book of Ruth, where Naomi counsels her widowed daughter, Ruth, to marry Boaz for “security” or stability (Ruth 3:1). In this passage, the male, Boaz, is the one to help and stabilize the female, Ruth. In fact, the book begins with marriages dissolving because of death, and notes the instability that ensues (Ruth 1). This implies, like Genesis, that marriage and security are correlated. Moreover, the remarriage that is portrayed in Ruth has links to Leviticus, and the laws for kindred redeemers (Lev 25). While, as Jeremy Schipper notes, any speculation on marital *love* or sexual attraction in the book of Ruth is speculative, I suggest that a primary function of the marriage of Ruth and Boaz is for mutual aid.¹⁴ As these images of married love in the Old Testament continue to be juxtaposed, we see an emerging sketch of married love as having a unitive character between a husband and wife that by definition excludes other loves. Marriage in this sense brings stability and fosters mutual support between the spouses.

There is another development in the character of Christian marital love in the Old Testament that is not as evident in the first marriage of Genesis. One sees a movement throughout the canon toward a more passionate picture of love in the Wisdom books. For example, the author of Proverbs dwells on the more erotic elements of marriage:

Let your fountain be blessed
And rejoice in the wife of your youth,
A lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
May you be intoxicated always by her love.

13 Mark Elliott’s exploration of Calvin’s “spiritually edifying” interpretation of explicitly ceremonial laws in Leviticus reveals that even typological readings can be practically useful for Christians. Mark Elliott, “Calvin and the Ceremonial Law of Moses,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 11.3 (2009): 282.

14 Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 35–38. Schipper goes on to note that the absence of explicit discussion on sexuality opens Ruth to queer readings that do not assume stable constructed sexual orientations. Furthermore, the marriages in Ruth complicate the Scripture’s portrayal of exogamy when the book is read canonically.

Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman
And embrace the bosom of an adulteress? (Prov 5:18–20)¹⁵

This is of course echoed descriptively in the Song of Solomon with calls for kisses and amorous depictions of the lover's bodies (Song 1:1; 3:5, 6); the author of Ecclesiastes calls the reader to "enjoy the life with the wife whom you love" (Ecc 9:9). Passages such as these add to the image of marriage in Genesis, infusing the mutual helping of the two-become-one with a celebration of sexual intimacy.

The Psalmist takes this in somewhat different direction, tying the delight in one's wife with "fruitfulness" and broader familial life (Ps 128). This is done without negating the sensual facets of married love described in the Wisdom books, but links this back to the vision of two-becoming-one that is so central in Genesis. It also anticipates New Testament discussions of family life such as those in the Pastoral Epistles by noting the connection between blessing, marital love, and the rearing of children. I think Candida Moss and Joel Baden are correct in their suggestion that the blessing of "fruitfulness" or fertility is not an individualized promise. Rather, "Despite the regularly voiced belief that God's words encourage a large family, it is not the number of children produced that is at stake in the divine blessing of fertility. It is the people who, far in the future, will descend from those who are blessed."¹⁶ No matter how one interprets the blessing of procreation, however, it is still deeply connected to marriage.

Turning to the prophets, we see the relationship that God has with Israel likened to a marriage relationship in places such as Isa 54. The text is challenging, because the metaphor of marriage is used to illustrate the disobedience and punishment of Israel by the Lord. The Lord is portrayed as the husband who "casts off" the wife of his youth, but who, after abandoning her, "gathers" her with compassion (Isa 54:6–7). The image is strong and raises provocative questions about judgement and grace. Though it may be troubling to read that the Lord abandons his people, John Goldingay and David Payne suggest that "Yhwh attempts to take the edge off" his alleged abandonment of Israel by noting its momentary nature, the comparatively great compassion he will proceed to show, and Israel's future ingathering.¹⁷ I do not think this attempt to soften the text effectively removes any difficulties, though it does provide some context.

15 See Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "'Drink Water from Your Own Cistern': A Literary Study of Proverbs 5:15–23," *Bibliotheca sacra* 157:628 (2000): 404–405, for a textual analysis. Chisholm sees the father figure in the text to be asking God to bless his son's marriage by providing sexual pleasure between the spouses, among other things. Chisholm also points out that "love" as it is used in the text can be found to refer to "romantic, sensual love" elsewhere.

16 Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, ed. Baden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 75.

17 John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 348–49.

However, despite the challenging nature of the Lord's actions, the integrity of the symbol of married love is striking. Though one's wife can be "forsaken," "cast off," and "abandoned," and though a husband can "hide his face" from her, his "everlasting love" endures (Isa 54:6–8). This image points not only to the stable nature of love, but to the brokenness and decay through which it remains strong. Again, the nature of marriage here includes the mutual support that Genesis describes, but to this portrayal is added the texture of frailty and disintegration that damages but does not destroy married love. That marriage is used as a theological metaphor here also anticipates the Christological symbolism that is more explicitly drawn in the New Testament.

Moving to the minor prophets, the image of married love takes on a deeper dimension. In the book of Hosea, for instance, it is a figure or symbol that transcends the marriage relationship itself. God commissions Hosea to take Gomer as a wife, being faithful to her despite her waywardness. This relationship not only demonstrates the fierce, committed love of a husband for his wife, but this love is elevated so that it illustrates God's love for his people, Israel. The book of Malachi addresses marriage as well, with the author describing it as not only a covenant between a husband and wife, but one in which "the Lord was a witness" (Mal 2:14). The author goes on to decry the unfaithfulness of Judah by use of the metaphor of a husband who is unfaithful to his wife, writing, "For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel" (Mal 2:16a). The text is instructive not only as a reminder of the importance of the spiritual fidelity of God's people but is also didactically useful for the ethics of marriage and family life for Christians.¹⁸

In the New Testament, the Pauline writings offer us the deepest insight into the mechanics of marital love. First, we need to be clear that these letters do not speak with a single voice but are multifaceted as they prescribe a certain vision of marriage. One facet of this Pauline theology of marriage is admittedly less exalted than that which one finds in the Old Testament; this vision sees married love as a shield against infidelity. In 1 Cor 7, for example, the author encourages marriage as a suitable alternative to engaging in adulterous practices made enticing by lustful desires (vv. 1–6). This same chapter also focuses on the virtues of celibacy (vv. 25–35).

In the letter to the Ephesians, the vision of marriage is more genial; in it is described the mutual love and sacramental character inherent to Christian married life (Eph 5:21–33). This vision of love contrasts with the more erotic vision presented in the Wisdom literature above, toward a more Christic, self-giving love. Finally, one must not forget the Pauline instructions for aspiring bishops and

18 See the ecclesial ramifications of this in Blessing O. Boloje and Alphonso Groenewald, "Marriage and Divorce in Malachi 2:10–16: An Ethical Reading of the Abomination to Yahweh for Faith Communities," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35.1 (2014): 7–10.

deacons in 1 Tim 3. While the character of marriage is not a point of focus, and so remains vague in these verses, it is important that the text is presuming that those aspiring to positions of leadership in the Church would be married only once and responsible in family life. That is, one of the qualifications for those aspiring bishops or deacons is faithfulness in married life, implying that, despite less positive portrayals of marriage elsewhere in the New Testament, faithful love between a husband and wife is a significant determining factor for leadership candidacy.¹⁹ Though, as Jay Twomey notes, there has been some dispute over the authorial intention of these instructions (for example, are they forbidding polygamy, or is remarriage more of the issue?), they portray marriage between a husband and wife as commendable *in some sense*. Twomey goes on to write that those in support of clerical celibacy have tended to read these passages spiritually (for instance, a bishop is “married” to the church), but even here the effect is that marriage, whether in a concrete or symbolic sense, is prescribed.²⁰ Even those who read the Pauline qualifications allegorically do not dispute the marital imagery, but suggest that it should be viewed in its sacramental rather than empirical dimensions. This only bolsters the unfolding canonical portrayal of married love as eminently positive for Christian leaders.

This survey of the scriptural witness reveals a series of images of marriage that, when viewed together, coalesce into a fuller, multifaceted vision of married love than each manifest on their own. It begins with the basis of married love that is unitive (Genesis, Exodus) and stabilizing (Ruth, Leviticus) and further includes the notions of eroticism (Wisdom literature), unswerving commitment (Isaiah, Hosea, Malachi), protection against infidelity (Corinthians), sacramentality, and Christic love (Ephesians). This is to say nothing of married love’s procreative capacity (Psalms). Of course, much more could be said, and an exhaustive study of marital love would be illuminating, but as it stands, the above serves as a sufficiently clear sketch of some of the biblical contours of married love.

There is one additional angle from which to view a biblical vision of married love, and that is through the lens of virginity. Clearly, in the Old Testament there

19 Luke Timothy Johnson points out that the words “married once” can be interpreted in several ways, though I argue that whether they are forbidding remarriage, polygamy, or celibacy, in any case they are portraying the Gen 2 description of marriage positively. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 213–14. Moreover, David Hunter notes that there were different interpretations of these words throughout the patristic period, but that “eventually, the presence of a requirement of strict monogamy for the clergy, based on the Pauline text, directly influenced the notion of Christian marriage as an indissoluble union, which Augustine and others were to call its *sacramentum*.” David G. Hunter, “‘A Man of One Wife’: Patristic Interpretations of 1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12, and Titus 1:6 and the Making of the Christian Priesthood,” *Annali di Storia dell’Egesi*, 32.2 (2015): 335.

20 Jay Twomey, *The Pastoral Epistles Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 55–56.

are certain instances where virginity is a theme (literal virginity in Deut 22:13–19 and Judg 11:37–8; spiritual virginity in Ezek 23:38 and Jer 31:4, for instance) and in the New Testament Jesus’s birth and subsequent life raise questions of virginity, as does 1 Cor 7:25–40.²¹ This latter text has been especially puzzling to scholars, with some suggesting that Paul urged virgins to remain unmarried because of his Stoic view of marriage and apocalyptic view of the future.²² Others note that for most of Christian history, this text has been interpreted as a balanced, positive portrayal of both marriage and celibacy, and was only recently interpreted as Paul’s response to extreme ascetics.²³ In any case, while I recognize the text’s suggestion that marriage, in some circumstances, may be more difficult, it does not greatly detract from the vision of marriage I have sketched in proceeding paragraphs.

We shall now turn to Augustine’s vision of marriage as he presents it, noting especially the similarities with and divergences from Scripture.

Augustine

Background

Augustine’s theology of marriage is most clearly set forth in his work *The Excellence of Marriage*. It is important not only to have a grasp of the scriptural precursors to Augustine’s work, but also an understanding of the situation in which he was writing. David Hunter reminds us that in his revisions, Augustine “wrote these two books [*The Excellence of Marriage* and *Holy Virginity*] in response to the “heresy of Jovinian.” Jovinian was a monk who had been condemned in the early 390s by synods at Rome and Milan. His primary offenses had been to argue that neither celibacy nor ascetic fasting gained for the Christian any special merit.²⁴ There are no extant copies of Jovinian’s writings in their entirety, but, fortunately, he was often quoted by his opponents, such as Jerome. From this quoted material, Hunter has provided a reconstruction of Jovinian’s thesis, and lists the following four aspects:

1. Virgins, widows, and married women, once they have been washed in Christ, are of the same merit, if they do not differ in other works.
2. Those who have been born again in baptism with full faith cannot be overthrown by the devil.

21 For an overview and summary of early and pre-Christian writing on virginity see Roger Steven Evans, *Sex and Salvation: Virginity as a Soteriological Paradigm in Ancient Christianity* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

22 Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background to 1 Corinthians 7*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 172–73.

23 Alistair Scott May, *‘The Body for the Lord’: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5–7*, Library of New Testament Studies 278 (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 52–55.

24 Hunter, “General Introduction” in *Marriage and Virginity*, 14.

3. There is no difference between abstinence from food and receiving it with thanksgiving.
4. There is one reward in the kingdom of heaven for all who have preserved their baptism.²⁵

It is noteworthy that all but the second point of Jovinian's thesis would not seem to many today to be overly contentious. Jovinian's reception in the fourth century, however, was far from a welcome one. Jerome, among other prominent Church leaders, attacked him vociferously. It is in the midst of this theological maelstrom that Augustine chimes in with *The Excellence of Marriage*. What is especially pertinent to this article is the first aspect of Jovinian's thesis, as it more directly relates to Augustine's description of marriage, written partly in response to it. Hunter notes that, relative to the other responses to Jovinian, Augustine's response reads as remarkably amicable. Hunter explains,

Instead of taking a directly polemical stance, Augustine attempted to develop a genuine theology of marriage and celibacy that steered a middle path between the extremes of Jovinian and Jerome: he maintained the genuine goodness of Christian marriage (against Jerome), while arguing for the superiority of the celibate life (against Jovinian). In the course of his discussion, Augustine developed novel conceptions of sexuality and sacramentality. The result, while not always consonant with modern Christian understandings of marriage and sexuality, was for its time a remarkably humane treatment of a difficult, previously underdeveloped topic.²⁶

Thus, Augustine's defense of both marriage and virginity was written to mediate between the more extremist positions of his interlocutors, Jerome and Jovinian. Augustine's treatments of marriage and virginity are not, then, detached, purely constructive works of systematic theology meant to foster clarity on particular issues. Yes, Augustine engages in exegetical work to draw out what he sees to be the thrust of Scripture, but he does this within a particular time and circumstance that no doubt affected his emphases. Having briefly considered the occasion of Augustine's treatise, one must now turn to examine the content of his work.

The Excellence of Marriage

Turning to *The Excellence of Marriage*, one sees Augustine giving a defense of the several goods of marriage and clarifying the nature of these goods. Hunter, in

25 David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26.

26 Hunter, "General Introduction," 16.

his introduction to the text, organizes Augustine's treatment of marriage into three goods that have since become the standard in Catholic moral theology. Hunter lists these as the procreation of children, fidelity, and sacramentality.²⁷ While a threefold list is helpful for keeping track of Augustine's thoughts (for Augustine himself notes these three goods in 24, 32), there is more going on here, as there are in fact five distinct though overlapping goods of marriages presented by Augustine. These are procreation, sociability, fidelity, sacramentality, and protection against sexual temptation.

Augustine notes that the primary and obvious reason for marriage is the procreation of children; he suggests, "Among all peoples marriage exists for the same purpose, namely to have children, and however they turn out, marriage is instituted for them to be born in a regulated and honourable way."²⁸ This is so central to marriage that Augustine is even willing to question the veracity of those marital unions that are formed without the intent to produce offspring:

It is often asked whether one should call it a marriage when a man and woman, neither of whom is married to anyone else, form a union solely for the purpose of giving in to their desires by sleeping together, and not for the purpose of having children, though with the understanding that neither of them will sleep with anyone else. It is not absurd perhaps to call this a marriage, provided they maintain the arrangement until the death of one or the other of them, and provided they do not avoid having children either by being unwilling to have children or even by doing something wrong to prevent the birth of children. On the other hand, if one, or both, of these conditions is lacking, I do not see how we can call these marriages.²⁹

For Augustine, then, procreation is not only one good of marriage but a necessary good of marriage. Therefore, in Augustine's eyes, "married" couples not intending not to have children, or those actively preventing conception, are not really married at all.

A second good of marriage according to Augustine is that of sociability, which is one of the elements of marriage by which he justified the continuing union of the elderly:

It seems to me to be not only because of the procreation of children, but also because of the natural sociability that exists between the different sexes. Otherwise in the elderly it would no longer be called

²⁷ Hunter, "General Introduction," 30.

²⁸ Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 17.19.

²⁹ Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 5.5.

marriage, especially if they had lost their children or had not had any. As it is, in a good marriage, even with older people, although the passion of youth between men and woman has waned, the relationship of love between husband and wife continues strong, and the better persons they are, the earlier they begin by mutual consent to abstain from carnal union.³⁰

It is fascinating here that Augustine sees the good of sociability as something that is separate and independent of the conjugal act. This can be deduced from Augustine's exhortation that if procreation is no longer a viable aim within a particular marriage, but the couple remains faithful to one another, the goal should then be to refrain from "carnal union." Presumably, the good of sociability could be found in a variety of other kinds of relationships, such as other familial bonds, friendships, etc. While this seems to be the case, Augustine does mention elsewhere that, just as food and drink are taken for the good of health, so marriage and sleeping together are "necessary for friendship." This seems to suggest that perhaps to Augustine there are certain kinds of sociability and friendships that can only be gained within the context of marriage.³¹

Somewhat related to sociability is the good of fidelity. This mutual faithfulness extends to the exclusive sharing of the conjugal act by the married couple for the sake of children, but also "to relieve each other's weakness, and thereby avoid illicit unions."³² Thus the married couple ought to support each other by providing legitimate and godly expression to sexuality. By doing so, husbands and wives are also providing a protection against the desire to express sexuality in ways that would be displeasing to God.

The fourth good of marriage in Augustine's work is the good of sacramentality, or the deeper reality that marriage represents. It is a curious thing that Augustine's sacramental treatment of marriage differs from that of Paul in Eph 5, as discussed above. Whereas Paul posits that marriage is a sacramental reflection of Christ's love for his Church and the Church's love for him, Augustine sees marriage as signifying other realities. In Christian marriage, Augustine sees the sacramental reflection to be that of unity, of a single heart turned toward God. He writes:

For this reason in our age the sacrament of marriage has been restored to being a union between one man and one woman, so much as that no one is allowed to be ordained a minister of the Church except a man who has had only one wife. This was well understood by those who held the view that even someone who had a second wife while

30 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 3.3.

31 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 9.9.

32 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 6.6.

still a catechumen or a pagan should not be ordained. What is at issue is not sinfulness, but the sacrament, as all sins are taken away in baptism.³³

While Augustine's understanding of sacramentality brings with it unique theological insight concerning the unity of the people of God, it is strange that he does not directly note the plain sense of Ephesians in the way that later theologians in the Catholic tradition have (see below). What is more, Augustine sees polygamous marriages such as those in the Old Testament as having a sacramental character reflecting the plurality of people who would one day be subject to God.³⁴

This leads to the fifth and final good of marriage, which is most closely related to that good of fidelity: the good of protection from temptation. According to Augustine,

marriages also have the benefit that sensual or youthful incontinence, even though it is wrong, is redirected to the honorable purpose of having children, and so out of the evil of lust, sexual union achieves something good. Furthermore, parental feeling brings about a moderation of sensual desire, since it is held back and in a certain way burns more modestly.³⁵

In other words, marriage both redeems sexual acts while also mitigating sensual desires as a natural consequence of "parental feelings." The married are not exempt from concupiscence by any means, and in Augustine's view there are still plenty of ways that one can become stained even within the confines of marriage.³⁶

These five goods, then, serve as the purpose of marriage for Augustine. Marriage is not to be viewed as something desirable in itself, but only in so far as it leads to the goods mentioned above. Further, it is worth noting that there are certain goods that marriage, in Augustine's view, is not meant to foster, such as the good of spouses bringing each other sexual pleasure (for Augustine, this would surely be anathema). More significantly for our discussion here, marital love is not a good, nor does it play a prominent role in marriage for Augustine. In fact, one of the few passages in *The Excellence of Marriage* wherein marital love is referenced is the following: "As it is, in a good marriage, even with older people, although the passion of youth between men and woman has waned, the relationship of *love* [*caritatis*] between husband and wife continues strong, and the better

33 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 18.21.

34 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 21.

35 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 3.3.

36 Among these are engaging in sexual acts with one's spouse for the purpose of passion (5.5), engaging in sexual acts in times of known infertility—including during pregnancy (6.5), and engaging in sexual acts without moderation (11.12).

persons they are, the earlier they begin by mutual consent to abstain from carnal union.”³⁷ Thus, it is clear that the description of love within marriage is not completely foreign to Augustine, but neither is it something that is drawn to the forefront.

Analysis

Having surveyed both Scripture and Augustine’s *The Excellence of Marriage* for descriptions of marriage, it is crucial to note that, though there is overlap, Augustine neglects significant facets of the portrayal of marriage surveyed above. First, Augustine does not see marriage as having the same character as that portrayed in Scripture. While in Scripture marital love is central (along with other goods such as procreation, which Augustine does mention), for Augustine it is an afterthought, except for his focus on the rather dour (at least when it is isolated from the wider canonical witness) Pauline text of 1 Cor 7. To his credit, Augustine’s discussion on fidelity and sacramentality does require spouses to love, but this love is always and exclusively directed toward God. In Augustine’s view, spouses are not to love one another for their own sake, but rather for the sake of Christ.³⁸ If Augustine does mention conjugal love, it is in passing, and it seems to be downright “unerotic,” and perhaps even cold.³⁹

The other strange departure Augustine makes from marriage as it is described in Scripture is his focus on sacramentality. I will explore this in more detail below, but the essence of the issue is this: Augustine sees the sacramental character of marriage to be a unitive image, while the Pauline description of marital sacramentality points to an image of divine love. Not only does Augustine obscure Paul’s point in shifting the focus of sacramentality, but he also fails once again to notice the love at the heart of Christian marriage as it is described in Scripture.

After Augustine: His Influence Today

Having discussed the notable differences between biblical and Augustinian treatments of marriage, one must ask whether Augustine is the catalyst to and representative of a trajectory of thinking within the Western Church. This trajectory increasingly has focused on several scriptural goods of marriage (procreation and fidelity, for example) at the expense of others. In other words, is Augustine’s voice an anomaly in the broader tradition, or perhaps even a deviation from it?

This question cannot be answered easily or fully, because, as Nygren notes:

37 Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 3.3.

38 Not that the two loves—love of God, and love of one’s spouse—are mutually exclusive.

39 It is interesting that though spousal love is described rather flatly in Augustine, his discussion on love in his treatise on virginity is very impassioned. See Daryl Ellis, “The Ambivalence and Lust of Marriage: With and Beyond Augustine Towards a Theology of Marriage as Consecrated Sacrifice,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66.1 (2013): 45.

To describe the changes that the Christian idea of love has undergone through the centuries would be ultimately the same as to write the entire inner history of Christianity. Every generation has had to face the problem of Christian love, and every new period has made a characteristic contribution to its history. These contributions, it is true, have not always been such as to disclose fresh aspects of the Christian idea of love; but then they are all the more revealing in respect of the structure and spiritual temper of their times.⁴⁰

Though Nygren is correct in positing the impossibility of a complete history of love in all its complexity, it is evident there is an identifiable “drift” in the Christian West, or at least a family resemblance of ideas about marital love. In order to determine the extent to which Augustine’s vision of marriage, and the minor role that love plays therein, has shaped the Western Christian tradition, we will examine texts concerning marriage in two major church traditions that are influenced by the marital theology of Augustine, namely, the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church.

Roman Catholic Heirs

Roman Catholic moral theology owes a great debt to Augustine, and most pointedly so when it comes to its theology of marriage. The official Church teaching as it is laid out in the Catechism explains that “[t]he intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws.”⁴¹ Not only is the married state referred to as a “community of life and love,” but the Catechism continues by describing the mutual love between man and woman to be good in God’s eyes.⁴² Further, the Catechism speaks of “conjugal love,”⁴³ “love of spouses,”⁴⁴ and marital love as a sharing in God’s “definite and irrevocable love.”⁴⁵

The goods of marriage, of conjugal love, according to the Catechism, are articulated in a manner reminiscent of Augustine’s treatise on marriage; these goods include a unity that is indissoluble, faithful, and open to fertility.⁴⁶ Further, it is noteworthy that in Roman Catholic theology, marriage is thought of as one of the seven sacraments, which is also in line with Augustine’s sacramental understanding of married life.

Looking to another source of Church teaching, the papal encyclical *Caritas Est*,

40 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1954), 29.

41 *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1603.

42 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1604.

43 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1643.

44 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1644.

45 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1648.

46 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1643.

we may see that Benedict XVI makes the distinction between self-imposing *eros* and Christian *agape*, which he sees to be central to Christian marriage.⁴⁷ Still, even though these loves are not the same, the Church teaches that neither are they completely different:

In philosophical and theological debate, these distinctions have often been radicalized to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them: descending, oblation love—*agape*—would be typically Christian, while on the other hand ascending, possessive or covetous love—*eros*—would be typical of non-Christian, and particularly Greek culture. Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life. Yet *eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.⁴⁸

Thus, *agape* completes and fulfills *eros*, bringing it to an honourable place. *Eros* is useful as the natural means by which men and women are drawn toward marriage, but this love is only perfected as humans share in the perfect love of God.⁴⁹

In sum, while there are some notable similarities between modern Roman Catholic descriptions of marriage and those of Augustine, there has been a general move since his time in Roman Catholic teaching to embrace love as a vitally important descriptor of marriage; in this respect, more recent descriptions of love are not consonant with Augustine. To be fair, this move has been a generally recent one, with the emphasis changing after Vatican II.

Anglican Heirs

The Anglican Church has been shaped by both the catholic tradition and reformed impulses. Though it differs from the Roman Catholic Church in its teaching on marriage, especially as it is enshrined in the *Book of Common Prayer*, there is still much in common between the two traditions. The Augustinian legacy is clear in both. The marriage liturgy in the *Book of Common Prayer* states that “matrimony was ordained for the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman; for the procreation of children to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord; and for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, in

47 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 1.3.

48 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.7.

49 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.10.

both prosperity and adversity.”⁵⁰ This description borrows two of Augustine’s three goods of marriage (procreation and fidelity) while omitting the third. And though the sacramental aspects of marriage are not explicitly mentioned in the *Book of Common Prayer*, it is worth noting that it draws implicitly on Pauline teaching, as matrimony “[signifies] unto us the mystical union betwixt Christ and his Church,” and is consecrated as “an excellent mystery.”⁵¹

In the wedding vows meant to be given and taken in the marriage ceremony in the *Book of Common Prayer* (the sense of which remains also in the modernized Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*), the engaged are asked by the priest if they will “love,” “comfort,” “honour,” and “keep/protect” each other.⁵² The couple’s love is also mentioned several times in priestly prayers during the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*.⁵³

Here again, as in modern Roman Catholic theology, we see a partial borrowing from Augustine, but also a significant departure from his theology in making love an important aspect of marriage. To love is one of the central commitments couples make one to another, and this theme continues throughout the liturgy.

Modern Divergences

As stated above, the marital theology of Augustine clearly informs both Catholic and Protestant theologies today. What has remained constant in both traditions is the role that procreation plays as a central good of marriage, as well as the goods of fidelity and mutual help. The sacramental character of marriage has remained in the Roman Catholic tradition, but this import has been dropped from explicit mention in the Anglican texts above.⁵⁴ One notable way in which both Catholic and Anglican theology has moved away from Augustine is with their inclusion of marital love in their vision of matrimony.

Augustine’s description of marriage as a sacrament seems to have had a different (though not contradictory) intent than the sacramental character of marriage described in the Roman Catholic Catechism. For Augustine, the sacramental character of marriage was reflected in the unity of one man and woman, a sign of the

50 *The Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1962), 564. I am using the Canadian prayer book as a benchmark here because it serves as a more recent articulation of an Anglican understanding of marriage. The 1662 prayer book remains the standard in the Church of England, and in addition to affirming the purposes of marriage given in the 1962 Canadian prayer book, it also includes the third Augustinian purpose of marriage, that it is “a remedy against sin”.

51 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 564, 570.

52 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 565 and *The Book of Alternative Service* (Anglican Book Centre, 1991), 530.

53 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 566, 570.

54 The Reformation was an occasion for changing the understanding of marriage, focusing on companionate elements in the relationship and rejecting its sacramental nature. See Christine Peters, “Gender, Sacrament and Ritual: The Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,” *Past & Present*, 169 (2000): 63–64.

united people of God.⁵⁵ The sacramental emphasis of the Catechism differs from this, for “[t]he entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. . . . Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church.”⁵⁶ This emphasis seems to be more consonant with the sacramental vision of marriage described in Eph 5. What is most noteworthy is the manner in which Augustine seems to avoid the plain sense of Eph 5, which is focused on Christ’s love more than on the unity of the Church. Clearly, the Catechism takes this scriptural focus with far more seriousness than does Augustine’s view.

In sum, Augustine did not see love to be one of the central goods of marriage, but modern traditions influenced by him do. The question that this leaves is why these traditions have departed from Augustine on this score. And further, where does this leave the Western Church’s relationship to Augustine? Has his theology been usurped or bypassed in some degree? Does he represent one step in a trajectory, or a figure that has been excluded from the modern concepts of marital love in theology?

In the next section of this essay I will suggest two possible catalysts to this movement in marital theology that, together, may partially account for its direction toward the embrace of marital love.

The Movement of Love

The inclusion of love as a central motif in marriage is a complex and historically-nuanced transition. This essay will not be able to trace all the details of how this has taken place, but, in dialogue with some recent scholarship on love, it will point in a couple of directions that will serve as fruitful ways to begin thinking about this.

A Return to Scripture

Perhaps one of the mechanisms by which marital love has come to be viewed in church documents has been a general movement toward a serious engagement with a scriptural vision of marriage. Commenting on the biblical portrayal of human love, Simon May notes that “[t]he Hebrew Bible nowhere expresses the enormous anxiety about sex that is found in the Christian tradition (less in what Jesus is reported as saying in the Gospels than in dogmas developed after his death, especially with Augustine).”⁵⁷ Augustine was certainly concerned about sex, and this was in part a response to Paul’s theology, though not the whole of it.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *The Excellency of Marriage*, 18.21.

⁵⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1617.

⁵⁷ Simon May, *Love: A History*, reprint ed. (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2013), 22.

In Augustine's treatise on marriage, his reading of Scripture is largely focused on the Pauline texts extolling the celibate life, wherein marriage is to be sought as relief for those finding the weight of lust to be unbearable. Willemien Otten picks up on this vein in Augustine, showing us also the contextual realities that may have been pressing in upon him: "[B]y Augustine's time virginity had become a serious rival to marriage as the prime model for Christian life."⁵⁸ He goes on to suggest that as Christianity lost its distinctiveness, as the pagan culture was converted around the time of Constantine, Christians increasingly turned to celibacy as a way to reinforce their uniqueness, but this time amongst themselves; this satisfied a felt need for visible separation. It was not that marital love became disreputable, but rather that there was a press toward more wholehearted devotion to God. It was thought that the celibate life was a vehicle particularly well suited to this kind of devotion. Augustine felt his desire to love God more fully could only be satisfied if he took the path of virginity. With this in view, it is possible that Augustine did not want to focus on marital love because he saw it as something that would compete with love for God. Simon May picks upon this:

And so nothing, Augustine continues in his Platonic vein, is more important than whether love seeks the right object—God, the source and sustainer of our being: the only object of love that can ultimately satisfy human needs—or whether it settles for the easier, more obvious, more immediately pleasing, but ultimately unsatisfactory, realm of the worldly. Since all genuine love is for God, when we love another person we are really loving God in her—and loving her for the sake of God. We never truly love her for anything else about her. Indeed, everything that is merely worldly is to be despised.⁵⁹

While May is correct to point out that God ought to be viewed as the sustainer and ultimate end of love for Augustine, he goes too far in suggesting that for Augustine everything "worldly" was meant to be despised. Peter Cahall takes a more nuanced reading of Augustine here, drawing on both *The Excellence of Marriage* and *De Doctrina Christiana* to remind us that ultimately spouses can use (*uti*) their relationship for the enjoyment (*frui*) of God alone.⁶⁰ Yet Cahall is astute in noting that friendship is a good to be desired in itself, and that, "for Augustine, the essence of

58 Willemien Otten, "Augustine on Marriage, Monasticism, and the Community of the Church," *Theological Studies* 59.3 (1998): 394. Gerald Schlabach picks up on this, suggesting that even sympathetic readers have found Augustine's views on celibacy to be idiosyncratic. Gerald Schlabach, *For the Joy Set before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 96. Schlabach does go on here to indicate that Augustine's call to celibacy was something he never tried to universalize. The call was to him, not to all Christians.

59 May, *Love*, 90.

60 Perry Cahall, "The Value of Saint Augustine's Use / Enjoyment Distinction to Conjugal Love," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 8.1 (2005): 122.

the institution of marriage is a unique kind of loving friendship, and according to Augustine's understanding of love, true love is always focused on the good of the other and not on any benefit that the other can provide."⁶¹

Whatever Augustine may have said about marital love, it pales in comparison with the more robust statements in the Catechism, *Deus caritas est* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. All of these texts are reflections upon the Old and New Testaments. Commenting on *Deus caritas est*, for example, Avery Dulles notes that the Pope thinks Scripture to speak of marriage so often only because it is an icon of Christ's love for the Church and reflects something of God's love.⁶² The positive portrayal of love in *Deus caritas est* is the result of a more thorough attention to the fullness of Scripture's witness. Whether or not this more comprehensive reading of Scripture was the conscious reason for the fresh articulation of marital love in the Catholic Church is disputable. Whatever the motive, though, in the last half-century, the Magisterium, influenced by the work of theologians such as Von Hildebrand, has elevated love to an equal footing with procreation.⁶³ In this respect, both for the Catholic Church and for the Reformers in England, a departure from Augustine meant a renewed emphasis on Scripture.

Literary Influence

Sketching a picture of marital love requires the images of Scripture, but the romantic details that are so often thought to inhabit this love come from other sources. Since the time Augustine wrote his treatise of marriage, a new kind love has come to the fore in Western Christianity, different from both the typical depictions of *eros* and *agape*. This more romantic vision of love is what C. S. Lewis describes as "courtly love," a form of love he traces from the eleventh century. This "courtly love" has much in common with what we assume to be part of marital love. Lewis notes:

It seems—or it seemed to us till lately—a natural thing that love (under certain conditions) should be regarded as a noble and ennobling passion: it is only if we imagine ourselves trying to explain this doctrine to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul, or the author of Beowulf, that we become aware how far from natural it is. . . . French poets, in the

61 Cahall, "The Value of Saint Augustine's Use," 123. Though, one wonders whether Cahall is stretching Augustine's conception of love too far here in applying what Augustine writes about in a general sense to a specific marital relationship. For the complexities of Augustine's understanding of love, see Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 26.

62 Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Love, the Pope, and C.S. Lewis," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 169 (2007): 22.

63 Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2009). See especially the introduction by John F. Crosby on xiii. Cristina Richie, "Disrupting the Meaning of Marriage?" *Theology & Sexuality* 19.2 (2013): 125.

eleventh century, discovered or invented, or were the first to express, that romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in the nineteenth. They effected a change which has left no corner of our ethics, our imagination, or our daily life untouched, and they erected impassable barriers between us and the classical past or the Oriental present. Compared with this revolution the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature.⁶⁴

At one time, this conception of “courtly love” that was at once so desirable was often at odds with the religious description of marriage, according to Lewis.⁶⁵ It is not clear which overpowered the other, but now, as we have seen in the Catechism and *Book of Common Prayer*, love is no longer reluctantly accepted as a part of conjugal life, but rather celebrated; this includes the moves toward recognizing the legitimacy of the kind of erotic love most vividly portrayed in Song of Songs, for example. Lewis can note, then:

A nineteenth-century Englishman felt that the same passion—romantic love—could be either virtuous or vicious according as it was directed towards marriage or not. But according to the medieval view passionate love itself was wicked, and did not cease to be wicked if the object of it were your wife. If a man had once yielded to this emotion he had no choice between ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’ love before him: he had only the choice, either of repentance, or else of different forms of guilt.⁶⁶

This change in religious attitude, I suggest, is precisely the development I have traced: a movement away from Augustine and toward a theology of marital love. This is not to say the love described in Ephesian 5 is much like that celebrated in Troubadour poetry; it self-evidently is not. What is clear is that in parts of Scripture love and marriage were intimately linked. In Augustine’s writing they were unrelated. With the introduction of “courtly love” and then its gradual sanctification as a legitimate aspect of marriage, we find them reunited once again.⁶⁷

64 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 2, 3.

65 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 13.

66 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 10.

67 For a different take on this, see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, annotated ed. (New York: Penguin, 2006). The whole book is helpful in tracing trends in marriage, though on page 23, Coontz suggests that it was not until the last two centuries that people entered marriages for the purpose of love and psychological fulfillment. She presents some compelling evidence for this idea throughout her book, though her focus on this respect is why a couple would enter into a marital union in the first place. This is not to make any claims about why marriages happen, for surely the reasons are manifold in each case and impossible to pin down with any exactitude, especially in a general way, for someone writing centuries afterward. Still, it

Tentative Conclusions

Scripture and poetic literature have impacted a theology of marital love, and because of their influence, Augustine's thought on marriage now stands in a precarious place. It is rather obvious that Augustine's theology of marriage still plays a prominent role in official theologies, especially his focus on the goods of procreation and fidelity.⁶⁸ Still, Augustine's tacit refrain when it comes to a description of marital love is representative of a strain of Christianity that departs from both the Scriptures and the thrust of the Western tradition, especially as it has come to fruition in official Church documents in both the Protestant and Catholic traditions. One wonders why Augustine was so silent, especially in view of the texts of Scripture we know he was reading, and in view of his extended discussions of love (albeit of a different kind) in other works. I would argue it is too much to see Augustine's *The Excellence of Marriage* as an aberration from the Western theological tradition, but perhaps it would not be too much to see his work here as representative of a sombre segment of the tradition that has been relegated to the sidelines due to its overlooking or rejection of marital love.⁶⁹

This is not to say Augustine's vision of love has not continued. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, is more attuned to the Augustinian articulation of marriage. Speaking about love and its place between spouses, Hauerwas suggests:

When couples come to ministers to talk about their marriage ceremonies, ministers think it's interesting to ask if they love one another. What a stupid question! How would they know? A Christian marriage isn't about whether you're in love. Christian marriage is giving you the practice of fidelity over a lifetime in which you can look back upon the marriage and call it love. It is a hard discipline over many years.⁷⁰

Now, Hauerwas is not eschewing love completely, but he is focused rather on the Augustinian good of fidelity, and it is only after this good has been realized that marital love can even be perceived. It may be that Hauerwas is simply taking

is important to note that, for whatever reasons marriages were contracted, in Scripture at least, we see psychologically fulfilling and even thrilling instances of marital love.

68 There is potential for Augustine's good of procreation to be challenged: there is likely a trend of voluntary childlessness in parts of Europe. See Anneli Miettinen and Ivett Szalma, "Childlessness Intentions and Ideals in Europe," *Finnish Yearbook of Population Research* 49 (2014): 33. The degree to which Christians intend childlessness within marriage may influence Christian consensus about the particular good of procreation.

69 John O'Meara reminds us that Augustine is no stranger to the Western tradition in his low view of romantic love; others, such as Montaigne, held very similar views to Augustine. Romantic love was not particularly important in the views of many because it faded so quickly; friendship was more enduring, and thus more laudable. See John J. O'Meara, "St. Augustine's Attitude to Love in the Context of His Influence on Christian Ethics," *Arethusa: A Journal of the Wellsprings of Western Man* 2 (1969), 51–52.

70 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright, 1st ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 617.

wedding vows seriously in a culture where they are often spoken with fingers crossed. Writing in a context where fathers are often irresponsible and absent from their own children, Hauerwas is emphasizing that marriage means commitment. But even this emphasis by Hauerwas would suggest, nevertheless, a general acceptance that marriage is something that requires love, and though the character of this love may often be misunderstood, it is commonly held among Christians to be central to married life. And while Hauerwas is given as an example of a theologian that is more in line with Augustine, his work is an exception that proves the rule: marital love is central in the spousal relationship.

Nothing has yet been offered in the way of a constructive account of Christian marital love. Partially, this is because it is so difficult to point to one expression of love and say, “this is it,” or to point out several discrete qualities in an attempt to exhaustively describe Christian marital love. The reality is more muddled, but arguably it is possible to offer a rough outline of Christian marital love. Here is a brief outline:

Christian marital love is something that is necessarily rooted in the divinely inspired Christian Scripture. Not Scripture read merely in a propositional, historically referential manner, but rather Scripture when it is read as a united whole. In Scripture, one sees married love to be unitive, stabilizing, erotic, requiring commitment, aiding in fidelity, sacramentally reflecting Christic love, and, finally, procreative. It is not that Augustine is unfaithful to this scriptural vision, but his piecemeal sketches are really not as comprehensive as they ought to have been, even in his treatment of marriage in *The Excellence of Marriage*, which focuses mostly on the negative Pauline passages instead of embracing the wider scriptural witness.⁷¹ Of course this scriptural vision works itself out imperfectly in many cultures and times, but it must remain rooted in the holy writ, anchored even as it is shaped by subsequent Christian traditions. Marriage, then, is a mystery pointing to the much richer reality of Christ’s love for his Church, which involves fruitfulness, pain, tenderness, and companionship.

These few pages have only scratched the surface of a theology of married love that is firmly rooted in Scripture. Using Augustine as a focal point, this paper has

71 It is not as if Augustine is unaware of the wider canonical framing of marriage, for we see him attempting to engage Song of Songs, for instance, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, but here his concern is not the plain sense of the text (as far as I can tell), but a figural reading that arbitrarily draws out the ecclesiological symbolism dormant in the text. For a treatment of this, see F. B. A. Asiedu, “The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism,” *Vigiliae christianae* 55.3 (2001): 308–11. On the other hand, as Hunter makes clear in his introduction to the English translation of *The Excellence of Marriage*, Augustine was faced with pressure from Jerome and Jovinian; Augustine wanted to extol the virtues of marriage against Jerome without capitulating to the heretical Jovinian, who wanted to elevate the married life to the status of celibacy. Augustine was treading a middle road that may have squelched any enthusiasm in him for defending the more erotic elements within marriage that Jerome would have found all the more contentious.

situated his vision of marriage in light of a larger tradition that extends before and after him. It has noted Augustine's contributions to the Western Church, and how they have both encapsulated Scripture in some places and deviated from it in others. Further, this paper has identified some Roman Catholic and Anglican theology that moves toward valuing marital love in its more complete scriptural rooting. More work has yet to be done in further fleshing out the historical developments leading up to the current place that marital love has in official theologies. Further, I hope that this paper could be an aid in spurring on theological reflection on marital love, a subject which has received scant scholarly attention, though much ink has been spilled on the idea of Christian love in a broader sense.