

‘Not Discerning the Body’: revisiting Rowan Williams’ “The Body’s Grace”

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Rowan Williams’ “The Body’s Grace” can only properly be understood within the framework of his overall theology. For Williams, our relationship with God is one of ‘radical reconciliation’—God refuses to reject those who reject him, and demonstrates this in the resurrection of Christ, who is re-presented back to those who rejected and crucified him, not as their Judge but as their Saviour. True conversion consists in realising this truth and finding our salvation in those we have likewise rejected. At the heart of this rejection, however, is our own self-rejection and desire to defend ourselves from hurt and insecurity through rejecting others. By contrast, sexual experience opens us up to both vulnerability and self-knowledge—we encounter ‘the body’s grace’ when we know ourselves to be objects of another’s desire and pleasure, for this is parallel to God’s desire of us, yet we risk rejection. Sexual morality can thus only be truly assessed by how much we intend to communicate through our actions—our human ‘intercourse’ which opens us up to self-discovery—not by conformity to some ‘legal’ framework. By recognising the importance of pleasure in this process, we should also recognise the morality of same-sex encounters, which may have an even greater authenticity than heterosexual encounters, precisely because they are only about pleasure, not reproduction. A church which accepts contraception cannot easily reject same-sex relationships.

Williams’ work shows that sexuality should indeed be central to the church’s concerns, yet there are serious weaknesses, not least in his treatment of the biblical material. His greatest weakness stems from a truncated christology, which itself comes from a weakened soteriology. The rôle of Christ seems to be to demonstrate God’s reconciliation to us, not to achieve it, since God would not reject us anyway. Consequently, Christ is treated in detachment from many of the great themes of the Old Testament and in particular Williams fails to follow through the biblical analogy between human marriage and God’s relationship with his people. The Bible treats this finally as ‘typological’, with

salvation being the true outcome of the ‘mystical’ and marital union between Christ and the Church. This, it may be suggested, is a rich and largely untapped vein of biblical thinking which, amongst other things, strengthens justification for the heterosexual paradigm which Williams finds so lacking.

In the final analysis, then, Williams’ work is misleading in providing a justification not only for same-sex relations but even for sexual encounters which would normally be characterised as ‘casual’, just as is the case with one of his examples drawn from English literature. Williams has not set out to mislead, but his work is misleading and, insofar as it represents his own convictions, we must also say that in this regard he is himself misled.

Part I

In August 2006, Dr. Rowan Williams gave a highly significant interview with “Nederlands Dagblad”, a Dutch daily paper, in which he was asked, amongst other things, about his own views on the acceptance of gay relationships in the Church now that he was Archbishop of Canterbury. Dr Williams replied—

Twenty years ago I wrote an essay in which I advocated a different direction. That was when I was still a professor, to stimulate debate. It did not generate much support and a lot of criticism—quite fairly on a number of points. What I am saying now is: let us talk this through. As Archbishop I have a different task.¹

The essay to which he referred was “The Body’s Grace”, the Michael Harding Memorial Address given to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in 1989. For many years this has been taken as expressing Dr. Williams’ ‘unshakeable’ conviction. Yet anyone who has read Williams’ work will know that he himself would not regard any theological opinion as unchangeable. Thus, in his reply to “Nederlands Dagblad”, he immediately added, ‘I would feel very uncomfortable if my Church would say: this is beyond discussion, for ever.’ But just as Dr. Williams believes the conservative view may need to change, so also he recognises the weaknesses in his own work.

Nevertheless, the impact even of this minor admission can be seen in the reaction a few days later of the Revd. Richard Kirker, Chief Executive of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. Kirker expressed ‘astonishment’ at Williams’ suggestion that “The Body’s Grace” ‘did not generate much

support’. Indeed, Kirker added an intriguing comment about the significance of Dr. Williams’ apparent views for his subsequent appointments—

Did he not become the Archbishop of Canterbury, to wide acclaim, because those charged with making the appointment were aware (as they were in the two earlier cases [of his appointment as Bishop of Monmouth in 1992 and Archbishop of Wales in 2000]) of the views contained in “The Body’s Grace”, and weighed them appropriately? It is inconceivable that the Crown Appointments Commission would have been unaware of the lecture, let alone of its deep significance—factors which we can safely conclude helped determine their ultimate recommendation. That seems to me very strong evidence of support indeed!²

Given the obsessive secrecy of the Crown appointments process, Kirker’s speculations must be treated as such. However, he closes his own response with a commitment, which is doubtless widely shared, to ‘go on admiring’ Dr. Williams’ earlier position. It is therefore entirely worthwhile not only revisiting “The Body’s Grace” ourselves but seeing how the Archbishop’s understanding of his task within the Anglican Communion is affected by this and other aspects of his theology.

Part 2

Rowan Williams’ views on the issue of homosexuality and how it should be addressed within the Anglican Communion can only properly be understood within his own, very personal, theological framework.

Fundamental to this is a doctrine of what I have called ‘radical reconciliation’—a conviction that at the heart of God’s dealings with us and with the world is a reconciling imperative which overrides all attempts at, or causes of, division. In essence, it is *the rejection of rejection itself*, by contrast with which our own rejections of others, and of ourselves, are feeble, unsuccessful and ultimately unnecessary attempts to ensure our own security.

Mike Higon, whose *Difficult Gospel* is based on a comprehensive survey of Williams’ work, puts it like this—

...for Rowan Williams the Gospel is very like the glimpse of God’s face which Jacob saw in the face of his brother Esau. It is a message of *disarming acceptance*—the news that we are held by a gratuitous love

which undermines and overthrows the selves we have built from defensiveness and calculation.³

This idea of ‘disarming acceptance’ is most clearly seen in Williams’ writings on the resurrection. The significance of the resurrection is that Jesus, who was rejected by *both* enemies and friends, is re-presented back to his victimizers as God’s own rejection of *their* rejection. Instead of returning as judge of his rejecters, Jesus thus returns with a call for them to be reconciled to *him* as God is already reconciled to *them*. Thus, Williams writes that in Acts 4—

The apostles stand in the name of Jesus before the court that condemned Jesus: to this court they must in turn pronounce the sentence of God, the sentence implied in the fact that the crucified and condemned is raised by God and vindicated. He returns as the judge of his judges.⁴

Salvation is then found in responding to this actuality.

The exaltation of the condemned Jesus is presented by the disciples not as threat but as promise and hope. [...] And grace is released when the judges turn to their victim and recognise him as their hope and their saviour.⁵

God rejects even what might be considered as his own, justifiable, rejection of the victimizers. Thus the very essence of God’s nature is that he refuses to reject what *deserves* rejection. Hence the resurrection has a far more significant place in Williams’ theology than the crucifixion, which is significant largely as the human rejection of Christ.

The practical outworking of this theology is that we find our own salvation in those whom we have victimised. For those in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, this meant Jesus. And so Peter can say to them (but *only* to them), ‘there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved’. The rest of us are called to find salvation in those whom *we* reject.

When I have seen that judging exposes me to judgement, I see that any oppressive and condemnatory role in fact wounds and diminishes *me*, makes me liable before the court [...]. I am my own victim, no less than the one I judge, and that is why I need salvation, rescue from the trap of the judge-victim relationship, the gift of a relationship which is not of this kind. But this means that the judge-victim relationship must itself be transformed: I am not saved by forgetting or cancelling my memory of

concrete guilt, the oppressive relations in which I am in fact inextricably involved. And so I must look to my partner: to the victim who alone can be the source of renewal and transformation.⁶

By the same token, to reject anyone, *even when they deserve rejection*, is to depart from the character of God and of the way of Christian living. Furthermore, this occurs particularly when we reject another person as ‘wrong’ in their belief or understanding, for such a rejection is, in reality, a ‘power play’ designed, consciously or unconsciously, to put us in a position of control.

At the heart of all such rejection, however, is our rejection of our own *insecurity*, which in the end is precisely that rejection of our own selves in which God refuses to indulge. Thus—

Conversion is always turning to my victim—even in circumstances where it is important to me to believe in the rightness of my cause. For we are not here dealing with law and morality; there are other kinds of judgement-as-discernment, discrimination and responsibility, which would require a different treatment. What is at issue is simply the transaction that leads to exclusion, to the severance of any relation of reciprocity. It may be unconscious, it may be deliberate and wilfully damaging, it may appear unavoidable; but as soon as such a transaction has occurred, God is with the powerless, the excluded. And our hope is that he is to be found as we return to our victims seeking reconciliation, seeking to find in renewed encounter with them the merciful and transforming judgement of Jesus, the ‘absolute’ victim.⁷

We are therefore called out of all rejection—at the heart of which is self-rejection—into the radical reconciliation which is the essence of salvation, and to live our lives accordingly without fear of insecurity and therefore without any fear or rejection of others.

In terms of the Anglican Communion, however, this means that Dr. Williams must be committed, above all, to holding it together. Far from being a mark of ‘compromise’, as some (including his erstwhile admirers) have imagined, this stems from a deep commitment not merely to the Communion but to the gospel as he understands it to be—the gospel that rejection is rejected and judgement is judged. Yet it remains true that some answer must be sought to the issue of human sexuality, and here too Williams’ core theology has a bearing.

Part 3

As regards Williams' views on human sexuality, Higton makes an astute observation—

The weight of [Williams'] argument does not fall on his analysis of Romans 1 or of texts like it: he undertakes that analysis only in the wake of his attempt to bring the core of the biblical witness—the Gospel of God's disarming acceptance—to bear on his understanding of sex. So, his reading of Romans 1 and similar texts is not unimportant, but it is secondary—and has to be seen in the light of the commitment to a Gospel-centred or Christ-centred reading of Scripture in general [...].⁸

So, Higton concludes—

His controversial opinion on homosexuality, right or wrong, emerges for him not as an exception to or an amelioration of his attempt to be obedient to Christ, but as an example of it: an example of his attempt to analyse moral questions in the terms of the Gospel, and to ask what it is for us in our lives to manifest Christ to the world.⁹

With this realisation, we can more easily negotiate our way through “The Body's Grace” itself. It begins with what might seem an almost arbitrary reference to two fictional characters in *The Raj Quartet*—a set of novels by Paul Scott about the English in India. Ronald Merrick and Sarah Layton may at first appear to be merely objects of sexual *angst*—one homosexual, the other heterosexual. When we reflect on Williams' core theology, however, we realise that what makes them significant is their *self-rejection*, which leads ultimately to their difficulties in relating to others.

Thus, Williams says, Merrick destroys and corrupts those around him because ‘he discovers how he is aroused...by the desirable body of a man, *and is appalled and terrified by this*’.¹⁰ This terror in turn results in Merrick ‘turning away from the recognition of those wants and needs that only vulnerability to the despised and humiliated stranger can open up and satisfy’.¹¹ Merrick rejects others, but he is ultimately rejecting himself.

Here, then, we see clearly Williams' understanding that ‘salvation’ can be found in ‘no other name’ than that of the one who is rejected. For Williams, ‘the despised and humiliated stranger’ whom Merrick would reject is

ultimately Jesus ‘typified’ in another—in this case the arousing man. Furthermore, we see how Merrick’s hatred of others is understood by Williams as self-hatred and self-protection. Hatred of the self is produced by those who arouse the self, and who must therefore be rejected to protect the self.

Similarly Sarah Layton is alienated from those around her; because in this case, according to Williams, she has an ‘innate truthfulness and lack of egotistical *self-defence*’.¹² She is ‘powerless’ before events (which is itself a preferred position within Williams’ theology, since God is always with the powerless—see above). But, like Merrick, Layton is not truly reconciled to herself and thus, Williams writes, ‘within her real generosity is a lost and empty place’.

Layton’s self-alienation is resolved, at least in part, by her being seduced. The seduction is a loveless action, carried out by a man Williams describes as ‘manipulative and cynical’. Yet Williams writes that in the aftermath, ‘Sarah comes to herself: hours later, on the train journey back to her family, she looks in the mirror and sees that, “she had entered her body’s grace”.’ This latter term Williams explains as follows—

Sarah has discovered that her body can be the cause of happiness to her and to another. It is this discovery which most clearly shows why we might want to talk about grace here. Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.¹³

Our bodies, he suggests, can bring us into ‘grace’ when through them we know ourselves to be desired bodily. Ultimately, this ‘knowing oneself as desired’ is a real experience of grace because it is also true that ‘God desires us, *as if we were God*’ (emphasis original), and in Williams’ view, it is *this* which the Christian community should teach us: that far from being objects of divine rejection we are desirable objects of divine desire—hence, he argues, the copious use of sexual imagery in the Bible to illustrate this reality.

Williams immediately goes on to question ‘why the fact of sexual desire, the concrete stories of human sexuality rather than the generalising metaphors it produces, are so grudgingly seen as matters of grace, or only admitted as matters of grace when fenced with conditions’.¹⁴ He is saying, with some justification, that unlike biblical metaphors, our actual sexual encounters are

treated with suspicion within the Christian community unless they fall into certain ‘approved’ categories. Yet we also detect a negative strand that runs through this lecture towards what Williams later terms ‘heterosexist ethics’.¹⁵ Williams goes on to root the essence of proper sexual desire in what he calls our ‘cultural’ being. Another way of putting this might be to speak of our ‘relational’ being—that being which is, as he says, involved in ‘intercourse’ in the widest sense. This means that for my sexual desire to be satisfied in an appropriate way, it must be perceived and desired by another, with the consequent involvement of self-awareness and risk, in support of which Williams refers to the philosopher Thomas Nagel.¹⁶

Crucially, therefore, ‘in a sexual relation I am no longer in charge of what I am’. My ego, left alone, is helpless to achieve what is required. Rather, I must desire the joy of another at this same level, and my desire for their joy must be desired in return, otherwise my sexuality falls into ‘perversion’. Solitary sexual activity, for example, involves no change in self-awareness and therefore no ‘grace’. Similarly, unbalanced sexual encounters such as rape, paedophilia or bestiality equally fail and fall short. But, he argues, in many cultural settings so also might what he calls ‘the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse’, insofar as it leaves only one person in control of the situation.¹⁷

The essence of the moral question regarding sexuality is thus essentially ‘how much we want our sexual activity to communicate [...] what we want our bodily life to say’. And it is in this regard that Williams says ‘a conventional (heterosexual) morality’ is actually *deficient*, since, by its very conventionality, it absolves us from making a *decision* about communication. Rather, ‘all we need to know is that sexual activity is licensed in one context and in no other’. And this, he argues, leads either to asceticism where the inner life and emotions are all that matter, or to hedonism where all that matters is what gives pleasure and does no damage.

The essential problem, as far as Williams is concerned, is that ‘conventional heterosexist ethics’ attempt to eliminate risk, and are thus marked by insecurity. This ‘sex without risk’ (the risk that my joy depends on someone else’s) is the *true* sexual perversion, because on that basis I will withdraw my body from true ‘intercourse’, or communication, with others.

Here again we clearly discern the outlines of Williams’ core theology: to reject is to stand outside salvation, to stand outside salvation is to reject. Yet we can only enter into this salvation in the area of sexuality by exposing ourselves to the risk of rejection and looking foolish, not only in the eyes of others but in our own eyes. We must abandon all attempts at maintaining our security if we are to find security at all.

Like Malvolio in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, we must, says Williams, take the risk of being ‘ruthlessly mocked and denied’—we must become potential victims of rejection, putting ourselves even in this encounter in the same place as the One who was despised and rejected, only to be re-presented back to those who rejected him.

But what of marriage and faithfulness? Williams goes on to say that this discovery of the body’s grace requires not just risk but, even when it is successful, *time*. Thus sexual faithfulness is required—though not so as to *avoid* risk (for that would be perversion) but for ‘the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of another’—in other words, to give *this* particular relationship time to be most effective.¹⁸ This means, though, that—

The worst thing we can do with the notion of sexual fidelity...is to ‘legalise’ it in such a way that it stands quite apart from the ventures and dangers of growth and is simply a public bond, enforceable by religious sanctions.¹⁹

Hence we make this fidelity independent of circumstances and feelings (‘for better for worse, for richer for poorer’), not as a ‘legal’ requirement to ‘legitimize’ the relationship, but essentially in order to give it time to have its full effect. However—

If this blessing becomes a curse or an empty formality, it is both wicked and useless to hold up the sexuality of the canonically married heterosexual as absolute, exclusive and ideal.²⁰

Unconditional public commitments are thus fundamental, yet ‘an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership *must conform to the pattern of commitment* or else have the nature of sin and nothing else is unreal and silly’ (emphasis added).

Sarah Layton's 'one night stand' is thus a fictional example of how people can actually discover grace in the real world 'in encounters fraught with transitoriness and without much "promising" (in any sense)'—in short, through what most of us would call 'casual sex', with all its inherent risks. Indeed, even in Layton's fictional case it leads to pregnancy and abortion (though not, as might also happen in real life, to venereal disease). Yet Williams asserts that 'it may be just this [kind of encounter] which prompts them [those who engage in such encounters] to want the fuller, longer exploration of the body's grace that faithfulness offers'. In other words, it may awaken the desire for marriage later.

By contrast, Williams says, the sanctioned union of heterosexual marriage can be 'a framework for violence and destructiveness on a disturbing scale'. Thus the decision as to whether a particular sexual relationship is valid must be based principally on what those involved intend it to mean through their bodily actions, not on its effectiveness in meeting emotional needs, nor on its conformity to any laws of man or Church.

Furthermore, Williams argues, fear of exposure to risk in the context of sexuality can lead on to many other forms of oppression—not least the oppression of women by men. Indeed, this perversion of sexuality is a paradigm of all wrongness, in that it refuses the 'other' out of a sense of insecurity.²¹ We are thus dealing with a 'political' issue, affecting every aspect of human community, and therefore we cannot isolate sexuality from the broader issues of social re-creation and justice.

By the same token, however, in order to prevent this becoming, as it were, an all-consuming issue for society, we need those who are called to celibacy, who find their identity only through God. Such true celibates are, Williams says, rare. Paradoxically they give the Christian community a means of nourishing its appreciation of sexuality. Williams, does not regard celibacy as simply the state of 'not having sex if you lack a legitimate outlet'. Rather, he treats it as a calling, typified by those in religious orders.²² In this light, however, celibacy cannot be regarded as an automatic calling for the homosexual.²³

Meanwhile, however, there is in society generally a 'massive cultural and religious anxiety about same-sex relationships', whose source Williams finally turns to address. Williams wonders whether this is because 'same-sex relations

oblige us to think *directly* about bodiliness and sexuality in a way that socially and religiously sanctioned heterosexual unions don’t.²⁴ In other words, we are threatened by same-sex relations, which touch on our insecurities as all sexuality should, whereas we are (falsely) preserved from such insecurity by unions which society and religion traditionally sanctions. Our anxiety in this area, like all anxiety, is thus another sign of our need of grace.

In heterosexual marriage in particular, ‘the embarrassment and insecurity of desire’ is deflected by the goal of producing children. This therefore ‘justifies’ sexual activity and save us from the discomfort we ought to be accepting. As Williams says, ‘it’s all in a good cause’, therefore we can excuse it. Yet, we might ask, does this not disparage the both the institution of marriage and also its purpose in providing the context in which to ‘be fruitful’? Williams does not address this. Instead, he argues that the benefit of same-sex love is to highlight the significance of desire ‘in itself, not considered as instrumental to some other process (the peopling of the world)’.

In a sense, therefore, same-sex desire is ‘pure’ in a way that heterosexual desire is not, in that it is free from any purpose other than pleasure, which, as Williams has argued, is the entry point to the body’s grace. Same-sex desire therefore faces us starkly with the ‘worrying’ prospect (worrying, Williams means, to ‘some kinds of moralists’) of ‘joy whose material “production” is [not children, but] an embodied person aware of grace’.

In one of his rare excursions into the Bible in this lecture, Williams therefore argues that this ‘sexuality beyond biological reproduction is the one foremost in the biblical use of sexual metaphors for God’s relation to humanity’,²⁵ and consequently—

...if we are looking for a sexual ethic that can be seriously informed by our Bible, there is a good deal to steer us away from assuming that reproductive sex is a norm, however important and theologically significant it may be.²⁶

Rather than being about the production of children, biblical sexuality is, according to Williams, very much about ‘entering the body’s grace’, and this both challenges our insecurity about joy and provides a clear accommodation for same-sex love—

If we are afraid of facing the reality of same-sex love because it compels us to think through the processes of bodily desire and delight in their own right, perhaps we ought to be more cautious about appealing to Scripture as legitimating only procreative heterosexuality.²⁷

Thus, with scholarly understatement, Williams opens the door wide to same-sex erotic activity, yet without perhaps realizing that incestuous, promiscuous and polyamorous behaviour, along with Sarah Layton's one-night stand, may also seek to elbow their way through. In this rationalisation, the *coup de grâce* to the Christian condemnation of homosexual activity is, Williams believes, delivered by the Church's acceptance of contraception. If sexual joy without reproductive intent is allowed in one context, then—

...the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts, or on a problematic and non-scriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures.²⁸

Traditional arguments are thus dismissed as utterly inadequate. They rely on 'ambiguous texts', they use the non-scriptural concept of biological complementarity (ignoring the psychological reality that people may not want to use their sex organs for the 'natural' purpose), they rest on 'the flat citation of isolated texts' and, almost inevitably, they are 'fundamentalist'.

By contrast, the theology Williams advances has, he believes, some hope of doing justice to 'the experience, the pain and the variety, of concrete sexual discovery'. Moreover, this is no 'marginal eccentricity', but rather is essential in giving us a true view of God, who is 'the trinitarian creator and saviour of the world', as well as being vital to our understanding of human culture.

Part 4

What should we say, then, to a work which, for all its brevity, is truly a *magnum opus* in Dr. Williams' theological output? First, we should surely note the affirmation Williams himself makes, that this is not a marginal issue, but is central to our understanding of the divine nature, of creation and salvation, of human society and of individual redemption. Indeed, the ongoing crisis in the Anglican Communion bears out this assessment. It may have been put on the

backburner regarding Williams’ personal approach to the theological task of the Church, but the issue will not go away, not because we are so small-minded, but because it is so profoundly significant.

Moreover, we should recognise that within “The Body’s Grace” there is clearly a justification not only for same-sex activity but for sexual activity generally outside the context of marriage. This is because what matters is not the fulfilment of certain ‘legalistic’ criteria but the communication and self-discovery consequent on sexual activity, which may bring ‘grace’ even (as in the case of Sarah Layton) within the context of seduction, unwanted pregnancy and abortion.

We should also note Williams’ dismissal not only of traditionalist arguments for the marital-heterosexual paradigm, but his clear distaste (at least at this stage) for a morality based on this which does not take sufficient account, in his view, of the *meaning* of the sexual act. Such a morality is, he argues, mere ‘heterosexism’ and may, indeed, be used to support the insupportable.

We must recognise the serious weaknesses in Williams’ arguments, including the lack of supporting biblical analysis or the appropriate development of biblical themes. Indeed, Williams makes little reference to examples or teaching from the Bible, and when he does this may include unexamined negative comments, such as that the material concerned is ‘patriarchal’.²⁹

By contrast with its use of the Bible, “The Body’s Grace” gives an oddly prominent rôle to insights gained from an English novel. Indeed, a further weakness is that the characters are treated as if they were real people. Sarah Layton’s discovery of her body’s grace via her one-night-stand, for example, is regarded with reverence. Yet in the real world she might equally have discovered guilt, embarrassment and genital herpes, to say nothing of the sorrow accompanying her abortion—hardly the stuff on which to build a theology of sexuality, let alone a channel to the salvation through self-acceptance!

Indeed, we may go further and say that although Williams’ argument is presented within a Christian framework, it is ultimately not a *Christian* argument. This is largely because it lacks a sufficiently-developed christology, which is surely one reason why Williams fails to develop a more positive

marital-heterosexual theology. He refers to the Old Testament use of sexual ‘metaphors’ regarding God and Israel, but he fails to take account of the New Testament understanding that this is *typology*, not metaphor, and that its fulfilment is in Christ. Thus, Ephesians 5:31-32 unites material from Old and New Testaments by developing the initial understanding of human sexuality presented in Genesis 2 in terms of the ‘mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church’,³⁰

Williams acknowledges this use of marital imagery for Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5, but in shying away from what he calls its ‘blatant assumption of male authority’, he omits its significance as a model of salvation and focuses on ‘the relational and personally creative element in the metaphor’. In striking contrast with Williams, Martin Luther held that this concept of marital union should inform our entire understanding of salvation—

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?³¹

Luther correctly argues that the body in which grace is found is Christ’s and that this is the hermeneutical key to understanding sexuality: ‘they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage’ of which human marriage is a reflection—albeit a ‘poor’ one. We see this indicated also in 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul takes to task those who would justify sex with prostitutes—

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!
16Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, ‘The two will become one flesh.’¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (1 Cor. 6:15-17).

Here, as in Ephesians, the concept of sexual union, of the two becoming one flesh, is fundamental and yet it is applied to the believer and Christ. Insofar as Paul sees this as analogous to a *bodily* union, we may suggest it undergirds his understanding both of union with Christ and of nature of the body of Christ elsewhere in the Epistles.

By contrast with Williams, there is no hint within Paul that a ‘one night stand’ might be a means of grace. On the other hand, although there are references to sexual union in “The Body’s Grace”, there is no acknowledgement whatsoever of the importance of the one flesh union as an outcome of sexual intercourse, despite it being so fundamental to the biblical understanding. Yet this is surely of paramount importance in addressing the issue of homosexuality, for of course the ‘one flesh’ union of Genesis 2 is a *re*-union via the conjoining of *ish* and *ishah*, man and woman. And also means that Williams cannot simply dismiss arguments from natural complementarity as ‘non-scriptural’.

Strikingly, “The Body’s Grace” also gives no attention to the biblical notion of marital covenant, which is surely much more than a basis for creating enough time for a relationship to achieve maximum benefit. Within the Bible, the Covenant is God’s own pledge of himself to his people. By the same token, their unfaithfulness, so often depicted in terms of adultery, is not merely the failure to be *faithful*. To use Williams’ phrase regarding sexual disorder, it is ‘the paradigm case of wrongness’,³² yet not because it refuses the ‘otherness’ of the other, as Williams says of sexual disorder generally, but precisely because it *chooses others* than the one with whom a covenant has been made. It involves desertion, not inclusion.

All this, which “The Body’s Grace” does not touch on, is fraught with potential meaning, much of which is still to be explored. It may be suggested, for example, that the biblical presentation of the marital relationship as a paradigm

of the relationship between God the Creator and Redeemer with his created, redeemed people gives us an insight not only into the process of salvation, as Luther saw, but into the very reason for creation itself. There is not space to develop that theme here. It is suggested, however, that what Williams refers to as isolated and ambiguous texts are not that at all, but are outcrops of a continuous theological stratum running all the way from Genesis to Revelation. This would also argue, however, that the marital-heterosexual paradigm upheld by the Church rests squarely on theological, and not simply biological, grounds. Apart from anything else, this helps us address the increasingly controverted issue of the use of gender-specific language in relation to God. For we may be equally sure that in the wake of the revision of the Church's teaching on how sexuality may be expressed we can already see approaching a revision of the Church's teaching on how God should be addressed. In this regard, it is surely significant that on page 10 of "The Body's Grace" Williams puts the word 'his' in relation to God in inverted commas. Indeed, he carefully eschews the use of the masculine pronoun, even where it makes his sentences uncharacteristically clumsy—

The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the trinity.³³

As with sexuality generally, we must not ignore this as some 'marginal eccentricity'. C. S. Lewis once said that 'a child who has been taught to pray to a Mother in Heaven would have a religious life radically different from that of a Christian child'. We must recognise the signs that are there already, for 'With the Church...we are dealing with male and female not merely as facts of nature but as the live and awful shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our direct knowledge'.

Each of these weakness, however, reflects a general problem within Williams' theology, which correlates with the somewhat-truncated nature of his Christology. And this in turn seems to arise from the weakened nature of his soteriology which underlies his doctrine of radical reconciliation. Since, according to Williams, God simply *does not* reject us even though we reject him, Christ most plainly functions to demonstrate an existing truth via the resurrection (namely that we are reconciled to God), rather than to achieve our

reconciliation via the cross. Thus, in his 2006 Good Friday ‘Thought for the Day’ on Radio 4, Dr. Williams spoke of how—

...what matters on this day is what’s done elsewhere, done by God, somehow using the stark injustice and horror of the execution of Jesus to turn around the way the world works. Intense activity elsewhere; as if you could hear faintly a workman hammering steadily away at the blank surface of human self-satisfaction and self-deception, and an irregular sound of plaster dropping to a distant floor.

This is not the *Deus absconditus* of Luther’s theology—the hidden God visible only in the sufferings of Christ to the eye of faith. This is not the Father being glorified by the Son of Man being lifted up as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, to draw all men to himself. This is a ‘somehow’ action, performed ‘elsewhere’, whose precise nature scarcely matters to us provided we know, as we do through the resurrection, God’s disarming acceptance, his radical reconciliation.

The outstanding question standing against Williams’ soteriology, however, is the place of the cry of dereliction: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ If God rejects all rejection, and uses Jesus to demonstrate that, why on the cross does Jesus give voice to the same sense of rejection by God as that expressed by the Psalmist? Is it just to show that Jesus shares our own sense of being rejected by God, which the resurrection will then prove to have been quite unnecessary? Or is it because God does actually reject the sinner until reconciliation is achieved through a sacrifice for sins, as the whole of Scripture seems to declare? And if it is the latter, does this not shift the centre of gravity in the gospels from the resurrection to the crucifixion, as Mark’s almost total omission of the resurrection might seem to indicate?

In the resurrection, Williams asserts, we are confronted by the truth through which we can enter into grace and be drawn out of our insecurities, but in his treatment of the crucifixion it seems we have only the exemplifying of our own rejection of others and of God. There is no clear sense in Williams’ writings that the crucifixion achieves anything necessary with regard to God himself. Hence, in his work generally there is also little development of the themes of atonement, sacrifice, temple, priesthood and so on, to say nothing of Christ’s own kingship in relation to the kingdom of God. Indeed, his christological

writing stands in almost total isolation from the Old Testament background—in stark contrast to the Christology of the New Testament itself.

Part V

What shall we say, then, in conclusion about “The Body’s Grace”? There is a reluctance in some quarters to critique any work by Dr. Williams—not, however, out of an understandable wish to avoid rushing in as an intellectual fool where angels might fear to tread, but out of an excessive respect for his position as the Archbishop of Canterbury and as a leader of the Anglican Communion worldwide. Yet whilst we should not make intemperate criticisms of a leader, at the same time, we must not be overawed by their status. On the contrary, we must remember that when Peter was misleading the Church in Antioch Paul opposed him, and he did so not in a private and discrete chat, but to his face and ‘before them all’.

Equally, we must not be deterred from criticising what Rowan Williams has written out of fear of those who oppose us simply for presuming to do so.

In “The Body’s Grace” then, Rowan Williams has produced a profound work consistent with his overall theology. Sadly, however, it is a work from which, as we have observed, one could argue not merely for homosexual but extra-marital sex, and that in the most casual of encounters.

In doing this, as Richard Kirker demonstrates, he has given intellectual credibility and pastoral encouragement to those who argue for a revision of the church’s teaching. Indeed, one of the reasons why he has been so fiercely attacked by some erstwhile friends is that they perceive him to have reneged on his earlier promise. I have argued this is because he is being consistent with his overall theology, rather than a sign of weakness. Nevertheless, the damage has been done.

By contrast with a more developed biblical theology, however, I would argue that Williams’ work presents an inadequate understanding of sexuality. He accuses traditionalists of depending on non-scriptural theories, but he himself builds substantially on extra-scriptural examples whilst failing to develop the rich themes of scripture as a whole. Ultimately, he fails to engage with the profound analogy in Scripture between human marriage and divine salvation,

and this at least in part is a reflection of a truncated christology related to a weakened soteriology.

It would be quite wrong, however, to attribute these weaknesses to pernicious motives. We must treat Williams’ ideas on their own merits, and indeed from an academic perspective we must even distinguish them from Williams the man. We certainly cannot say that Williams wrote “The Body’s Grace” to mislead the Church. Nevertheless, its conclusions are misleading and if, as Williams himself admits, the arguments are not entirely valid, it is time that this is recognised more widely and more publicly.

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ENDNOTES

1. www.nd.nl/htm/dossier/seksualiteit/artikelen/060819eb.htm
2. www.lgcm.org.uk/html/AngText03.html
3. Mike Higon, *Difficult Gospel: the theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 16, emphasis added.
4. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, emphasis original.
6. *Op. cit.*, p. 6.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. *Op. cit.*, p. 147.
9. *Op. cit.*, p. 147-8.
10. “The Body’s Grace”, 1, emphasis added.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 2, emphasis added.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
15. See p. 5.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
30. See the Book of Common Prayer. Williams' position in this regard is thus deficient even as an 'Anglican' perspective.
31. LW 31:351
32. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 3, emphasis original.