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## Water Is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness

Jana Marguerite Bennett

New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 243 pp. \$55.00.

This sparkling, stimulating, and challenging book can be read on three levels. First, it can be viewed as a form of countercultural ecclesiology. Second, it can be seen as a prophetic protest against the idolatry of contemporary marriage and family. Third, it can be interpreted as an exercise in Christian social, sexual, and political ethics for everyday life. At whatever level the reader approaches the book, it interrupts our normal assumptions and calls for a conversion in our thinking.

Jana Bennett dives deeply into the contemporary discussions of marriage and family. However, she surfaces in different areas of the pool than most of her colleagues. Bennett is suspicious of two overarching cultural ideals: the idealization of marriage and family and the vapid individualization running through contemporary U.S. lifestyles. She claims that recent attempts to bring religious resources to counter these skewed ideals—the Religion, Cultural, and Family Project, directed by Don Browning, and the theology of the “domestic church” from Roman Catholic quarters—miss the mark and foster false eschatological ideals. Further, they narrow the focus toward marriage and family and create dichotomies between various forms of life. This misplaced focus, in turn, misrepresents the nature and meaning of the church.

In this work of first-class scholarship and rigorous analysis, Bennett sets a clear agenda. In part 1, she steps away from excessive fascination with marriage and family as singular institutions. In part 2, she proposes to reflect on marriage, family, gender, and singleness from a different Christian theological perspective than is usually the case. In order to do so, Bennett proposes a theological vision—an ecclesiology—in which Christians first understand themselves as members of the body of Christ with a unified history in which all participate in God’s grace. Only when keeping this in mind can Christians rightly understand how marriage and the various states of singleness (virginity, divorce, widowhood, and monasticism) relate to each other and to the church as the household of God.

For Bennett, immersion in the life of the church reforms people’s identities and their sense of what makes for a “household.” In this way, the meaning of household and what constitutes membership in it is transformed. The reason

why? Water is thicker than blood. Households, in turn, in their multiple forms, are one of the primary places where virtues are learned and practiced toward achieving the end of dwelling in God. The focus, then, in this conception is no longer on a narrow vision. When small households are oriented toward God in Christ, they begin to see their character over against false cultural ideals.

Along this meticulously argued journey, Bennett takes Augustine as her unlikely conversation partner. She mines Augustine's writings in a creatively revisionist way that stopped this reader in his tracks, correcting historical distortions and offering a challenging alternative vision to address contemporary problems. The book would be a rich resource for a graduate seminar, and selective sections would be suitable for adult education in congregations. It will stimulate a high level of dialectical discourse. At least it did for me.

I came away from the book with a number of counterperspectives and questions. When Bennett takes the church as her starting point and center of gravity for seeing the world differently, does she not slip into a form of ecclesiolatry? Is all grace on the ecclesial side and all demons on the side of the individual's needs and desires? Could romance, passion, and bodily pleasure also be a means of access to the divine? Do we have to reduce dating to an ascetical exercise? Are all premarital and cohabitating sexual relations devoid of relational attachments? Finally, how about same-sex relations and same-sex marriages? Bennett admits she has no ready answers for this pattern of relationality. Yet if she logically follows the criteria she so vividly illustrates, Christian gay and lesbian households may also dwell in the household of God.

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## Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture

Samuel Wells

Nashville: Abingdon, 2008. 196 pp. \$20.00.

Freshly translated from parish ministry in his native United Kingdom, Sam Wells began his tenure as dean of Duke Chapel and research professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity School in 2005 at the age of forty. Duke and its magnificent chapel provide an unusual preaching context, perhaps one of the