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Rethinking the Church's involvement in weddings¹

The proposal that the Church should bless same-sex unions raises for us some big questions about the blessing² of any unions, and about the Church's involvement in weddings.

by John W.B. Hill

Ot has long been the Church's practice to bestow blessings – on congregations, on homes, on penitent sinners, on fishing vessels, on domestic animals, etc. Blessing is also the most distinctive element of a wedding celebrated by the Church. (If you get married at City Hall, this is the one thing that won't happen: there won't be any blessing.)

Is there any limit to what or who the Church will bless? Do we not treat the blessing of a marriage as if it is in a category of its own? And if it is, then we need to define what it is we are blessing and what it isn't.

One thing is clear: what we bless as marriage is a *sexual relationship*. If it is not a sexual relationship, we do not bless it as a marriage. (A relationship that is not consummated can be declared null and void, without a divorce.) Nor do we bless *all* sexual relationships. So we need to ask, what is *special* about the particular sexual relationship that we bless as marriage?

I The marriage we bless is sacramental
The reason we bless God for a couple's marriage is that we recognize in it an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace (which is how the catechism defines a sacrament). Specifically, we consider this particular relationship to be an embodiment of the special grace of God's faithful, covenant-

relationship with the people of God, a sign of the mystical union between Christ and the Church. 'Christian marriage' mirrors the biblical portrait of God-the-creator choosing to woo rather than to control the creatures God has made – a God who can frequently be seen as the forlorn lover, forsaken by an unfaithful partner, as in the prophecy of Hosea.³ In the story of salvation, God enters a relationship in which, as Rowan Williams puts it, "God is at the mercy of the perceptions of an uncontrolled partner."⁴

Williams also points to the new dignity which this relationship with God brings us, for it is a participation in the very life of the triune God. "Grace for the Christian believer," he says, "is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as wanted.... 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. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God."⁵

This is an affirmation of what must be the supreme paradox in all creation: that God desires us as friends. Yes, we are

(Continued on page 3)



Notes:

1. Based on a study paper produced for the Bishops' Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Diocese of Toronto, by the marriage subcommittee.

2. This paper follows the popular custom of referring to 'blessings' as if they were acts done to someone or something; but see the more precise definition of ritual acts of blessing under V, below.

3. Hosea 1:2; 2:16-25; 11:8-9; see also Jeremiah 2:32-33; Ezekiel 16; Isaiah 54:4-8.

4. Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace", *Ourselves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*. Ed. Charles Hefling (Cambridge: Cowling, 1996).

5. Ibid.

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A Journey into Dialogue: Same-Sex Blessings

*The stained-glass curtain you're
hiding behind
Never lets in the sun*¹

The young agnostic singer in the Joel song attempts to convince Virginia to go out with him. The nuns and her mother are opposed to the image he represents. Each of the Christians are blinded by their individual stained-glass curtain.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, in his recent enthronement sermon, ends with a vivid story of being confronted by a simple picture of Jesus behind the curtain of a sanctuary.

*It was as if the veil of the temple was torn
in two:*

*I saw as I had never seen the simple fact of
Jesus at the heart of all our words and
worship, behind the curtain of our anxieties
and our theories, our struggles and our
suspicions.... And he says to us, 'If you
don't know why this matters, look for
someone who does – the child, the poor, the
forgotten. Learn from them, and you will
learn from me.'*²

I recall going into Little Trinity, Toronto, as a divinity student, to assist at a funeral. The clear panes in the attractive windows were a shock. As a cradle Anglican, I had never been in a church that did not have stained glass windows. I had heard that Little Trinity was different, but the windows made a dramatic statement to me. It was an experience that took a lot of unpacking. I began to realize in a much more concrete way what it meant to be an Anglican. The 'stained-glass curtain' that I had grown up with illuminated the Son no more or less than the clear 'curtains' of Little Trinity. The abiding lesson was that we were all Anglicans.

When we began the journey into editing this issue, I expected the road to be littered with potholes, any number of which might swallow our publication efforts. I had little idea of how optimistic I was. The writing around same-sex blessings, indeed about any related liturgy, is not well marked with reason, compassion, forbearance or

openness to other. It is often marked with vindictiveness, special pleading, myopia and vilification. Tradition, reason and especially scripture are frequently used as a means to discredit and even destroy other. The proprietary stained-glass curtain serves well the certitude of the self-righteous. In the midst of this cacophony, one may still encounter precious sounds of reason, occasional glimmering lights of love, and faintly heard expressions of openness and acceptance and willingness to hear other, even as the writer seeks to be heard.

The journey of the people of God has always been to discover God's voice and will in the circumstances of life. The Jewish concept in prayer of kavenah is to have a sense of standing in the presence of God, and to intend to fulfill one of God's commandments. "Kavenah in prayer is the very antithesis of the mechanical and perfunctory reading of words." Over the millennia we have developed liturgies and prayers for guidance in walking the right path in our time, and we have searched our traditions and our scriptures so as to walk faithfully. In the process we have forged new ways, concepts, liturgies and voices. Without binding ourselves to all ancient beliefs and practices, we have held within these adapted responses the essence of our traditions. As we have in the past, it is again time for us to hear the voice of God, the voices of our traditions and scriptures, and to hear how our shared experience can clear a path on which we might together walk faithfully through our lives.

In this issue of *Liturgy Canada* you will encounter such voices of openness and love. Even as you hear them, however, you will be asked to engage with them in turning towards dialogue. You will be reminded that the terms, concepts and core beliefs from which each of us enter into dialogue, must be clearly delineated. It is critical that others are at least able to understand what we are saying as a pre-condition of being able to enter into reasonable, responsible and mutual discourse.

I am indebted to the authors in this issue for their patience and openness in accepting our request for their contributions. Especially, a note of gratitude goes to The Right Rev. Jack McKelvey, Bishop of Rochester, and the Rev. Canon Steve Lane, Deployment and

Ministry Development Office, for sharing the experience of the Diocese and a version of the liturgy that developed from that experience. We hope you will accept our offerings as part of the national dialogue related to same-sex blessings. It is a 'dialogue' in which far too many monologues have held sway. Our writers have reflected seriously on their contributions and they represent serious and prolonged reflection, research, dialogue, and prayer. They are presented for your consideration, not your conversion.

Our contributors challenge us to return to the basics and to discover the questions that we must address before we can even begin to think seriously about answers or solutions. The articles themselves invite questions and responses, indeed they specifically invite your response to questions that they raise. We offer these to you as the kind of questions we need to engage. Undoubtedly you have your own questions, and we would like to hear them. We also want to hear your response to our offerings. Please join with us in our national dialogue. Write to us with your comments, responses, and questions. They could form the basis of a renewed national discussion; at the very least, they could form the basis for a future issue. ☒

John R. Dunn is a retired priest of Niagara Diocese and Member of the Board, Liturgy Canada

Notes:

1. Billy Joel, "Only the Good Die Young," *The Stranger*, (Joelsongs, BMI, 1977). ACNS 3328, Lambeth Palace, 27 February, 2003; posted on CANANG

2. Rabbi Hayim Halvey Donin, *To Pray as a Jew* (New York, Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1980), p.19.

SAME SEX UNIONS

(Continued from page 1)

God's 'children'; but God desires us as partners. And marriage is the biblical image which finally prevails in describing the union of Christ and the Church.⁶ Thus our practice of blessing particular relationships is an acknowledgement of the way those relationships reflect the mystery of God's ultimate purpose in creation: the redemption of creation through covenant relationship.⁷

Such relationships are sexual because it is in the fullness of bodily intimacy that mutual care and delight are fully expressed. When "the Word became flesh"⁸, God revealed a love that embraces us in all that flesh entails.

II Sacramental marriage is part of the one supreme sacrament

Every sacrament articulates, each in its own particular way, the one supreme sacrament which is Christ: in him we see humanity united to God – a union defined by incarnation, and disclosed in cross and resurrection. Each particular sacrament celebrates some aspect of our engagement with this central mystery.

In a post-Christendom world, we have learned once again that sacraments are meaningless if they are isolated from the larger sacramental reality. Baptism is meaningless if detached from the eucharistic community; likewise, sacramental marriage is meaningless if detached from baptism and eucharist. The marriage blessing is normally celebrated with partners who are baptized, within a celebration of the eucharist. In this way, the sacramental meaning of their relationship is integrated into the larger sacramental reality of the Church, which is the sphere of reconciliation and the anticipation of God's eternal kingdom. The marriage blessing presupposes that the marriage will be lived out within the fellowship of God's people, and as an embodiment of God's love in Christ.

III Not every marriage is sacramental

Within the tradition of western sacramental theology, a defect of intention (that is, a fundamental divergence of purpose from what the Church intends in a sacrament) renders the celebration of that sacrament

(Continued on page 4)

"...our practice of blessing particular relationships is an acknowledgment of the way those relationships reflect the mystery of God's ultimate purpose in creation: the redemption of creation through covenant relationship."

Notes:

6. 2 Corinthians 11:2-3; Ephesians 5:32; Revelation 21:9.

7. See Charles Hefling, "What Do We Bless and Why?" *Anglican Theological Review* 85:1 (2003) 87-96. Hefling assumes the unity of wedding and blessing (which this paper questions – see IV, below); but his central concern – that blessing acknowledges not merely God's purpose in creation but even more God's work of new creation – is something this paper would wish to affirm as well.

8. John 1:14.

SAME SEX UNIONS (Continued from page 3)

invalid. Thus, if partners to a marriage will not accept the vocation to a sacramental union, the Church's blessing cannot make their union sacramental. (Our rituals are not magic!) There would be an obvious defect of intention, for example, if the couple were non-believers.

IV The sacramental character of a marriage is signified by the marriage blessing
In the western church there has traditionally been a clear distinction between the *wedding ceremony* (which was the act of entering a socially-defined relationship) and the *marriage blessing* (through which a relationship was acknowledged and celebrated as sacramental). *The wedding ceremony* was originally a matter of local civic custom, and not the business of the Church.⁹

It was the *marriage blessing* that first appeared in a rite of the Church (a *marriage eucharist*); only later did Church ritual incorporate elements of the *wedding ceremony*. (This later development is not surprising: marriage vows were one element – at least in some places – of the civic wedding ceremony; and including vows in the marriage eucharist is one way of specifying the particular kind of marital relationship that may be recognized and blessed as sacramental – a covenant relationship of faithful love and mutuality.)

A distinction must also be drawn between the inherent capacity of a particular marriage to be sacramental, and the actual consecration of that marriage as sacramental through the marriage blessing. A eucharistic analogy may clarify this distinction: we do not consecrate particular bread to be the sacrament of Christ's body in order to deny the possibility that other bread shared in Christ's name could be sacramental; indeed, part of the grace of eucharistic sharing is the gift of illumination whereby our eyes are opened to recognize the potential meaning in every act of sharing bread. Thus by blessing certain marriages we do not deny the potential of other marriages to be sacramental (signs of God's covenant grace); yet we distinguish those marriages that have been so blessed as manifestly sacramental.

V Sacramental marriage is an environment of grace, not bondage

A ritual act of blessing is a solemn act of thanking and praising God for something we recognize to be a blessing bestowed by the Creator¹⁰ (although sometimes it is merely a pronouncement, acknowledging that thing as holy, or an invocation, asking God to make it a blessing).¹¹ To bless God for something is to consecrate it to the purpose God has in mind for it, to designate it a means of God's redemptive work in the world. Thus consecrated and designated, it has acquired a sacred identity which people of faith will honour.

This is what we do when we bless a marriage. To quote Williams again, "When we bless sexual unions, we give them a life, a reality not dependent on the contingent thoughts and feelings of the people involved; but we do this so that they may have a certain freedom to 'take time' to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can."

Williams continues, "[When we bless sexual unions,] we should not do it in order to create a wholly impersonal and enforceable 'bond'; if we do, we risk turning blessing into curse, grace into law, art into rule-keeping..."¹² When a marriage becomes an enforced bondage, this understanding of God's gift, recognized and celebrated in the act of blessing, is lost.

So also, H. Richard Niebuhr observes how such a relationship mirrors the divine-human relationship through its acknowledgement of the otherness of each partner: "Love is reverence: it keeps its distance even as it draws near; it does not seek to absorb the other in itself or want to be absorbed by it; it rejoices in the otherness of the other; it desires the beloved to be what he [or she] is and not seek to refashion him [or her] into a replica of the self or make him [or her] a means to the self's advancement. As reverence, love is and seeks knowledge of the other not by way of curiosity nor for the sake of gaining power but in rejoicing and in wonder. In all such love there is an element of that 'holy fear' which is not a form of flight but rather a deep respect for the otherness of the beloved and the profound unwillingness to violate his [or her] integrity."¹³

This union of partners who are radically different, each of whom reverences the otherness of their beloved, is typically symbolized in the union of male and fe-

Notes:

9. See Bryan D. Spinks, "Revising the Marriage Liturgy in the Church of England: Towards Clarifying Issues and Possibilities." *Anglican Theological Review* 80:2 (1998) 207-222.

10. See 1 Timothy 4:4-5.

11. See the discussion of blessing in the Book of Occasional Celebrations, pages 116-125. Clearly, the ritual act of blessing within our Anglican marriage rites follows the latter form – a pronouncement / invocation.

12. Ibid.

13. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Purpose of the Church." *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. James F. Gustafson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Quoted in Paul Elmen, "On Worshipping the Bride." *Anglican Theological Review* 68:3 (1986) 241-249.

male; but it would be a mistake to identify gender difference itself as the necessary symbol of the divine-human relationship. God is not 'gendered'. So too, the capacity for procreation and the care of children may be recognized as symbolic of yet another aspect of the bond between God and humanity in Christ¹⁴; yet we do not consider the incapacity to have children an impediment to marriage.¹⁵

Amongst all the varieties of sexual relationships, then, we recognize this particular pattern of relationship, in which each person finds delight in the other's delight, and love is continually renewed through forgiveness, to be sacramental of the divine-human relationship in the covenant of grace. It is a relationship of freedom, faithfulness and mutuality: neither partner seeks control of the other or self-sufficiency from the other, but each makes the other's joy determinative of their own – just as we see God doing in the story of our redemption.

This particular sexual relationship which we bless as 'Christian marriage' has been frequently misunderstood. And so we must affirm:

1. 'Christian marriage' does not legitimate a sexuality that is inherently anti-social, dangerously wild, destructive and disordered; rather, 'Christian marriage' reveals the ultimate sacramental potential of sexuality.

2. 'Christian marriage' does not render sexuality risk-free; rather, it enables marriage partners to welcome the full risk of relationship.

3. 'Christian marriage' does not establish and sustain a relationship of ownership and control; rather, it grounds the relationship in a grace that dispels the need for control.

4. The purpose of 'Christian marriage' is not to secure rights of property and inheritance; rather, it calls partners to a just sharing of resources.

5. The intention and potential to procreate is not essential to 'Christian marriage'; rather, 'Christian marriage' confirms, for couples who are free and able to have children, the divine dignity of choosing to bring new life into the world within a

covenant of grace.

Given this understanding of 'Christian marriage', we can begin to reconsider some of the pressing issues of our time:

1. What would be gained or lost if the Church were only to celebrate and bless marriages (after a civil wedding ceremony), instead of performing weddings?

2. Must the 'Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage' be ritualized in a way that presumes and implies the virginity of the couple?

3. How should the Church respond to Christians who choose to end their marriage because of difficulties that seem to preclude the grace for which we had hoped?

4. How can the Church recover the distinctiveness of sacramental marriage without denying the goodness or the validity of relationships defined in other ways?

5. Can we recognize and celebrate sacramentality in gay and lesbian relationships when they are characterized by this same grace of mutual comfort and delight in the bond of faithfulness? ☒

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"[When we bless sexual unions,] we should not do it in order to create a wholly impersonal and enforceable 'bond'; if we do, we risk turning blessing into curse, grace into law, art into rule-keeping..."

Rowen Williams,
Archbishop of Canterbury

Notes:
14. See Romans 7:1-6.

15. See the *Book of Common Prayer*, page 570 re: the marriage of a woman 'past child-bearing'.

Same-sex rites

The question of same-sex rites involves foundational questions of scripture and liturgy and doctrine. In taking up the issue of same-sex rites, Liturgy Canada is thus also taking up these other questions. It is pursuing the study of the foundational doctrinal, scriptural and liturgical issues that surround such a rite.

by F. Dean Mercer

“You may think this is meant to be pro-vocative. In fact it is intended to be descriptive – ruthlessly descriptive of a debate made endlessly frustrating by moving targets and shifting support.”

Foundational studies usually assume that everyone knows what’s being built. But is it clear what we are building here?

As a member of *Liturgy Canada* and also a member of Fidelity and of Archbishop Terence Finlay’s Dialogue Group in the Diocese of Toronto, the answer to this question is anything but clear. I am writing therefore to ask this more basic question. Or, as I’ve seen and heard it expressed so far in the church’s debate: will this same-sex rite be about marriage, about a blessing or about Trudeau (the ‘church’ has no business in the bedrooms of its adult members)?

You may think this is meant to be provocative. In fact it is intended to be descriptive – ruthlessly descriptive of a debate made endlessly frustrating by moving targets and shifting support. It is a debate also made deeply confusing by contradictory positions among those advocating for same-sex rites – contradictory positions which nevertheless have all been formally represented in the Anglican Church of Canada.

It is possible that the confusion arises from the complexity of a new or previously unexamined phenomenon being brought under the gaze of the Gospel. It may rise from uncertainty and imprecision about the roots of this phenomenon in Christian Scripture and tradition. Perhaps, that is, the argument for same-sex rites is still unfinished. Like a team of good detectives who know they’re on to something but can’t make the final case, those advocating for a same-sex rite have perhaps not yet put the pieces together satisfactorily for the case they wish to make.

Authorized and commended?

And yet, if our study is of a Christian same-sex rite that would be authorized by the church and commended to our people, in the end a case of some precision must be made that fairly represents those making it

and that answers the tests which the scripture and tradition will force it to pass. For in the end, only a liturgy that is true to Scripture and tradition and transparent to the gospel has any place in the worship of the church. The problem with the current imprecision in the argument for same-sex rites is that it calls such transparency into question.

There is, too, a darker possibility: that the imprecision serves a useful political end, that as long as the debate is muddled and the suggested changes vague, the real and deep consequences of such a change are effectively obscured and a church body that has little taste for the debate in the first place is discouraged from coming to grips with it.

Permit me to illustrate:

Some would say, don’t be silly. The proposed rite is completely in harmony with the long Anglican tradition regarding marriage. It is a marriage rite we want, because it is marriage we are after. The only new thing being contemplated is the gender of the spouses.

And yet that party is quickly interrupted by a second party who seek a marriage rite but who are quite clear that it is a new kind of marriage breaking definitively with the traditional Christian understanding of marriage as monogamous. The marriage to be solemnized in this rite is to be an open marriage. While two people may commit to the lifelong support of one household, sexual intimacy outside the marital relationship would be taken for granted.

But then a third party chimes in. This party is in favour of blessings. The church’s tradition and teaching on marriage is clear and they have no intention of challenging it, of disregarding it or of discussing it. They argue instead that the modern phenomenon that they wish to address in same-sex rite is beyond the horizon of Scripture. The most appropriate liturgical line of development is therefore an entirely new rite with a distinctive understanding

of blessing to support it. In a blessing, they say, it is the couple that is the active party, rather than the church. The couple identifies the virtues of the relationship and brings the blessed relationship to the church. The church then affirms – rather than bestows – the blessing.

Marriage in all but name

But here, too, there is confusion. For not all see this procedure as a departure from tradition, as a new understanding of blessing. Some intend the rite of blessing to carry the same force as marriage, to be marriage in all but name. Some argue further that the church properly affirms, rather than bestows, a blessing, and has always done so – that such is, from ancient times, the meaning of ‘blessing’. So in fact the modern phenomenon they wish to address, and the rite of blessing through which they address it, is not beyond the horizon of scripture at all. It is firmly rooted in Scripture and Tradition, if only these be understood correctly.

Here already are four quite different understandings of what it is we are building. And this is not even to mention all those who are not interested in a rite of any kind, but who support the call for same-sex rites (of any kind) because such rites weaken, in their eyes, the church’s doctrine of marriage. This group believes that questions of sexual relations and intimacy are essentially questions of personal conscience and ought not to be regulated by ‘rites’ or ‘doctrines’ or ‘marriage’. They believe, that is, in sexual freedom.

It is no wonder that the debate is confusing. But it is essential that we sort out the confusion, that we define clearly what kind of rite we are after, and why, before we try to shape the rite itself. For if we do not, we risk creating a rite that serves primarily a political and not a liturgical purpose. And this is, perhaps, a kind of blasphemy.

Observe, for a moment, how the confusion serves all parties advocating same-sex unions. As long as the nature of the rite is ambiguous, parties who would define that rite differently can work together. As long as the rite remains unspecified, hard questions about its real consequences can be avoided. And a bewildered public can be persuaded, by the very vagueness of the proposal, to assent.

No agreement

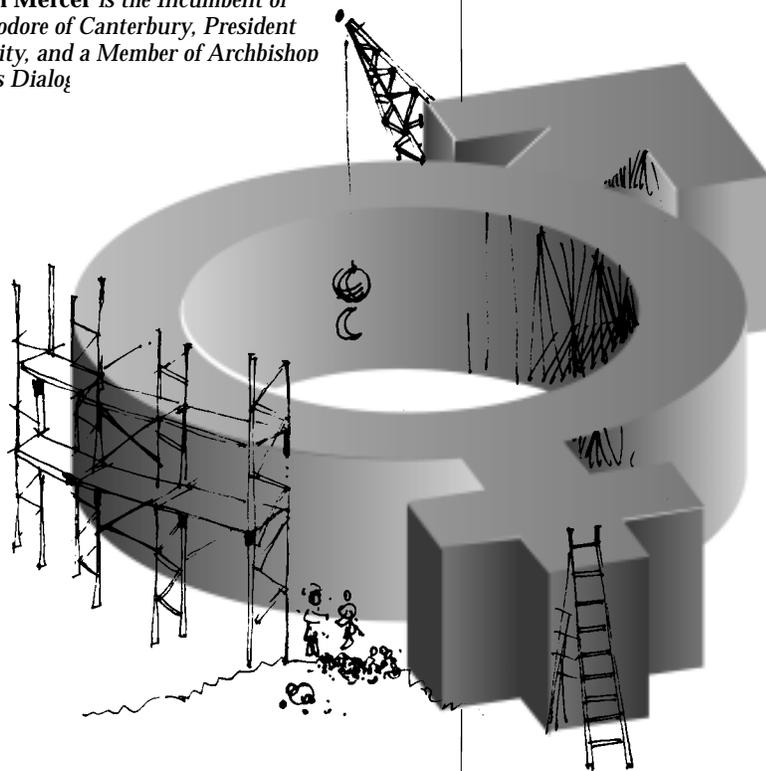
Is this any way to reflect the truth of the gospel in the worship of the church? We need to ask, when we approach a liturgical rite, not what best serves our various needs or interests, but what best reflects the good news of Christ. There is no agreement here about that good news in regard to marriage. Those requesting a rite of blessing do not agree on what they are blessing or why they are blessing it, or even what such a blessing is. How can we possibly fashion a rite of blessing that has any claims to transparency or truthfulness, any claims to the faithful articulation of God’s purpose in the church’s act of worship, when the debate itself is so muddled?

Christian liturgy is not the arbitrary creation of new rites for new experiences or needs. It is, rather, the vehicle by which we submit our experience to Christ in baptism. It is the vehicle of our faithful witness in Word and Sacrament to the revelation of God in Christ and it is the vehicle of our brave proclamation in word and deed of Christ’s Kingdom in the world.

And so we ought not to take it lightly. What is it that we are building here? Is it a marriage, with just the genders changed? Is it a blessing? Or is it just an ecclesiastical variation on Trudeau: a demand from the people of the church for sexual freedom, hallowed by the ceremonial of the church? ❏

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“It is no wonder that the debate is confusing. But it is essential that we sort out the confusion, that we define clearly what kind of rite we are after, and why...”



A radical path for liturgists

As an Anglican I ask if the time has come for churches to politely bow out of the marriage business. Many would say it is long past time and that clinging to the sociology of a defunct Christendom is merely to portray the church as an archaic historical curiosity, suitable for good staging (you can't beat those gothic arches!) and with a real organ, a sentimental nostalgic ambiance.

By Gordon Baker

"...many of the old patterns of marriage and the family, as 'subtly and deeply intertwined with the life of society,' have been disrupted by change, new and in some respects better patterns are emerging."

G.R. Dunstan

I remember while at college the debates surrounding the question, "What is a 'Christian' Marriage?" For some it was a sacred institution, different (meaning 'superior', of course) from other marriages. On the other hand there were those who viewed marriage, between two Christians or whoever, as an institution that was defined, sanctioned and registered by the state as representing the whole society. The latter view seems the most sensible since clergy who conduct marriages do so only with authorization by, and in the name of, the state. Certainly the marriage vows found in liturgies have not had a profound effect recently considering that in Canada today some 37% of marriages will end in divorce rather than death. Meanwhile the same vows repeated in the remarriage of divorced person, which churches sanction, makes the whole process a charade.

What then of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony? It needs to be faced that, while marriage may be understood sacramentally by Christians, it is not a sacrament like baptism and eucharist with strong scriptural roots. It was established as a sacrament as part of a system within the social development of Christendom when church and society were intertwined, a day long gone except where there are vestiges of state-churches which today are all under pressure.

An early indication that Anglicans should rethink the sacramental system is found in *The Book of Common Prayer*, in the Thirty-Nine Articles, which clearly states that Matrimony is "not to be counted" as a sacrament of the gospel (Article XXV). More recently, in his book, *Theology for the Third Millennium* (p.88), Hans Kung, reviewing the sacraments in light of the New Testament states, "And least of all is there any reference to a sacrament of matrimony, much as Ephesians 5:21-33

speaks of the great mystery (*sacramentum* in the *Vulgate*), and although Jesus, according to Mark 10:212, forbids divorce.

There have been some wonderful theological games going on between sacramental history and sacramental theology and between exegesis and dogmatics. One of the most convoluted is to be found in attempts of Karl Rahner to pull it all together around the authority of the church, so that,

The institution of a sacrament ... also takes place simply through the fact that the Church as founded the Church with its character as the primal sacrament.

As Kung points out, the reference now is ecclesiological rather than scriptural.

John Macquarrie, in his, *Principles of Christian theology*, states: "Marriage, of course, is a 'natural' institution as well as being a Christian sacrament, and as a natural institution, is a far wider phenomenon." He then goes on to quote G.R.

Dunstan in recognition that

many of the old patterns of marriage and the family, as 'subtly and deeply intertwined with the life of society,' have been disrupted by change, new and in some respects better patterns are emerging. (p.453ff).

Macquarrie acknowledges and leans towards the ideas of Karl Rahner as he works at pulling it all together.

Intellectually, it is a stimulating exercise but little emerges for resolving the practicalities. I believe it would be better if we faced the anomalies and acted accordingly. Three courses of action for liturgists to consider:

1. Work within the churches to have them officially acknowledge the state's authority in defining, sanctioning and registering marriages and that they urge the state to set up whatever is necessary (marriage courts, licensed officials, etc.) to administer the

policy. (There could be stiff ecclesiastical opposition here and while the theological rhetoric will be righteous in tone, one might also keep an eye open for whiffs of simony – the fees are quite good these days!).

2. Work towards persuading the churches to delete the marriage service from future revisions of prayer and service books.

3. Begin work on a new liturgy, “A Service of Blessing,” which would be for all who would seek God’s blessing as they enter various phases in their lives. Surely the time has come to recognize that only people are blessed, not objects or insti-

tutions, and what each makes of the blessing received is up to them. It seems to me that scriptural warrant for this understanding is evident from the days of Abraham. We need to have done with the idea that in the name of God we can bless everything from battleships, breweries, and fox hunts to new business ventures, houses, or whatever, including marriages or same-sex unions. We need to recognize that it is people, whoever they may be, that God blesses, and it is the churches’ job to declare that blessing open and available to all comers.



Gordon Baker is a retired priest and a former member of the Doctrine and Worship Committee.

Blessings of same-sex unions

A proposal to bless the committed relationships of gay and lesbian people is deeply dividing the Anglican Church of Canada, and indeed the whole of the Anglican Communion. What follows is written in the conviction that a major contributing factor to our confusion is a faulty theology of blessing.

By Paul Gibson

Western Christians have inherited a notion of blessing which presupposes that things and people not already within the religious sphere are at best neutral and possibly tinged with evil. For instance, if we buy a new set of candlesticks, or a new chalice and paten, for the altar, we are likely to bless them before we use them. Our formulas of blessing tend to infer that there is something called “holiness”, of which bishops and priests are in charge (deacons may bless only the paschal candle at the Easter Vigil), and that it may be applied to the object in question. The 1962 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Anglican Church of Canada provides for the blessing of a wedding ring with the words, “Sanctify, O Lord, this ring.” The implication is that it was not already sanctified (holy). The action of blessing changes its status.

The Jewish notion of blessing is quite different. Jewish religious practice abounds with blessings, but it is not the thing that is blessed but God who is blessed for the thing. I have heard a Jewish liturgist and rabbi explain that Jewish theology assumes

that everything that comes from the hand of the Creator is good. It is when we bless God for something that it is released for our use. Thus a meal begins with the blessing of bread,

“Blessed are you Lord God, Ruler of the universe, giving us bread from the earth.”

Such blessing does not confer status on something otherwise sub-standard; it is an act of praise and thanks-giving which enables the one who prays to use the object in question properly and with gratitude.

Some blessings are more elaborate. They begin with praise and thanksgiving and go on to supplication. One such prayer, most of which was in use during the lifetime of Jesus, reads (in part),

“Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, for you nourish us and the whole world with goodness, grace, kindness and mercy. Blessed are you, Lord our God, for the earth and for the food.”

Then it turns to supplication,

“Have mercy, Lord our God, on us your people Israel, and your city Jerusalem, on your sanctuary and your dwelling-place, on Zion, the habitation of your glory Restore the kingdom of the house of David to its

“Jewish religious practice abounds with blessings, but it is not the thing that is blessed but God who is blessed for the thing. I have heard a Jewish liturgist and rabbi explain that Jewish theology assumes that everything that comes from the hand of the Creator is good.”

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place in our days, and speedily build Jerusalem.”

A similar pattern appears in a very early Christian document called Didache, which begins,

“We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy vine of your child David, which you made known to us through your child Jesus; glory to you for evermore,”

and later continues,

“As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains and when brought together became one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.”

A similar pattern of praise and thanksgiving becoming supplication may be seen in our eucharistic prayers.

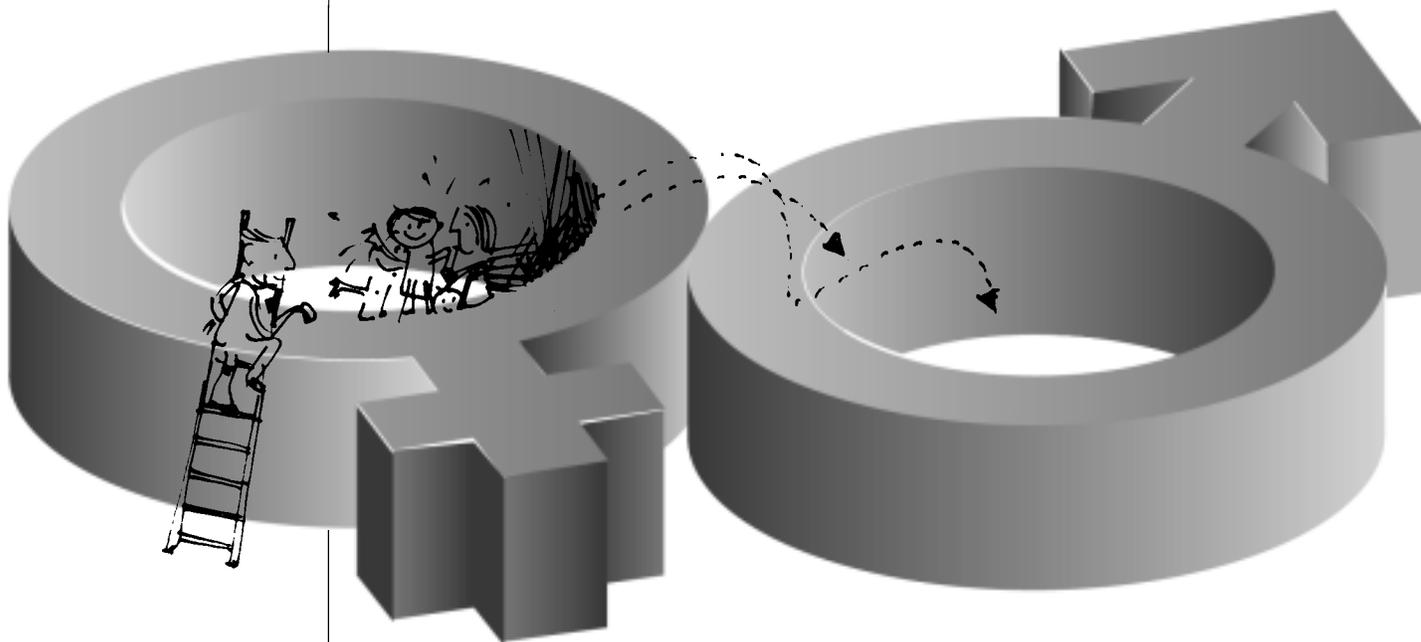
It is true, of course, that Jewish blessings include the blessing of people. The classic example is the so-called Aaronic blessing, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you.” (Numbers 6.24-26). Here, too, we have not so much the transfer of an otherwise absent divine power as the unveiling and recognition of God’s saving goodness which has already been made known.

When Zechariah blesses John the Baptist (Luke 1.68ff) he blesses God, “who has

looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.” God’s benevolence is taken for granted.

There are some Christians who seem to think that the blessing of gay and lesbian people who are committed to faithful relationships would give them a status, a certified standing, that would be inappropriate. This point of view betrays a faulty theology of blessing. The question is not whether the church should transfer an otherwise absent eminence to such relationships (as if we could); it is whether there is goodness there for which God should be praised. Of course there may be people who deny that any gay or lesbian relationship could contain any goodness whatever, basing their opinion on certain biblical texts while ignoring other inconvenient passages. Such use of scripture is another issue for another day. But those of us who have known gay and lesbian couples who live in faithful and loving commitment to one another have seen that goodness. We are prepared to say, “Blessed are you Lord our God, Ruler of the uni-verse.”☩

Paul Gibson is Co-ordinator for liturgy for the Anglican Consultative Council, and was formerly Liturgical Officer of the Anglican Church of Canada.



The Diocese of Rochester: A pastoral journey

In 1973 the Fifth Bishop of Rochester, the Rt. Rev. Robert R. Spears, Jr., undertook a pastoral ministry to gay and lesbians Christians and their families. After consulting with several priests of the diocese about the need for ministry to the gay community, the bishop encouraged them to undertake such a ministry and gave them his support. The bishop then appointed the Rev. Walter Lee Syzmanski to serve as Canon for Homophile Ministry.

Stephen T. Lane

In the fall of 1979, Bishop Spears established a Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Ministry to the Homophile Community. Fr. Syzmanski chaired the Committee, which consisted of eight lay and five clerical members. The Committee's primary purpose was education about and advocacy for gay and lesbian Christians in the congregations in the diocese, and it presented programs in almost every congregation. The Committee made its first report to the Diocesan Convention in 1980, and continued to report annually. In the Committee's report to the 1993 Convention, reference was made to the "affirmation of lesbian and gay couples that wish to make a life-long commitment to their partners as part of their life in Christ."

In the course of his pastoral ministry, Fr. Syzmanski developed a service of The Celebration and Affirmation of a Covenant Relationship. The service was refined over the years, and the service published in *Liturgy Canada* is a later variant of that service. According to Fr. Syzmanski's records, he first presided at a covenant relationship service between two women in the summer of 1973. Over the course of the next 20 years, he presided at more than 100 services. Neither the bishop nor the Dio-

cesan Convention authorized the service for use nor, in fact, did the Convention ever vote on the blessing of same sex unions.

The pastoral ministry to the gay and lesbian community was nearly two decades old when the place of gays and lesbians in the church began to be hotly debated in the Episcopal Church. When the homophile ministry was founded, the war in Vietnam and the ordination of women were the hotly debated issues in the Diocese of Rochester. Later there was a good deal of controversy concerning the Attica Prison riot and its aftermath. By the time the larger church began to discuss the gays and lesbians, the ministry to gays and lesbians was part of the fabric of diocesan life. When Fr. Syzmanski left the diocese in 1992, he was not replaced as Canon since, by then, the ministry to gays and lesbians had moved into the congregations of the diocese.

The ministry to gays and lesbians continues to be a pastoral ministry. In that context, a service affirming and celebrating a covenant relationship may be part of the ministry. ☒

Stephen T. Lane is Canon for Deployment and Ministry Development in the Diocese of Rochester of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A.

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The celebration and affirmation of a covenant relationship

Introduction

The celebration and affirmation of same gender couples are offered as an opportunity for persons of the homosexual orientation to participate in faithful relationships. The support of significant same gender friendships and committed relationships is essential for the well being of gay and lesbian persons.

Biblical theology clearly supports the basic need of all persons to have a wholesome, intimately affectionate, and long-term relationship with another person. This reality goes far deeper than sexual orientation. Basic Christian compassion presses us to affirm and support this tenet of health and wholeness for all persons. Thus, the church is called upon to celebrate and affirm friendships, marriages, and same gender commitments for both spiritual and human health.

By tradition and theological precept, couples are themselves the ministers of their covenants. By the grace of God these couples aspire to be life-long and faithful in mutuality and support through their covenant. The church celebrates and affirms that which already exists. It is the two persons who minister to each other

and bless God – that is, give thanks to God for their mutual love and their covenant with one another. Considering these principles, the church is not called upon to endorse or bless sexual orientation. The church, however, does act appropriately, and for the good of the people of God, when the church upholds and celebrates, in the name of Jesus Christ, any two persons who are willing to make a life long covenant of fidelity and love with each other.

Concerning the Service

Persons desiring the Celebration and Affirmation of a Covenant Relationship must notify the officiating clergy at least 60 days in advance of the date of the ceremony. The officiant is required to counsel the couple regarding the meaning and purpose of a covenant relationship and determine their readiness for such a commitment.

A priest or bishop normally presides at the service. It is desirable that the lessons from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are read by lay persons. During the entrance of those taking part in the liturgy a hymn may be sung or instrumental music may be played.

The Gathering

Celebrant: Dear Friends in Christ: We have come together in the presence of God to celebrate and affirm the covenant of these persons in a life-long commitment of love. The calling to live in a bond and covenant of love is a gift from God in whose image we are created and by whom we are called to love and live in harmony with God and one another. In celebrating this covenant, we are reminded of our highest vocation: to love God and to love our neighbor.

N and N are here to bear witness to their love for each other, and their intention to embody Christ's love in their relationship. Each has found the other to be a gift of God in the midst of a broken and sinful world. We are now called to share in their happiness, and to witness this exchange of vows because we believe God, who is love and truth, sees into their hearts and accepts the offering they are making.

The union of two persons in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy, for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity, and for the greater

manifestation of love in the lives of all whom they encounter. Therefore, this commitment is to be undertaken and affirmed seriously, reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with God's intention for us.

The Declaration of Consent

Celebrant: N and N, you have come here so God may confirm and strengthen your love in the presence of this company. Therefore, I ask you to declare and affirm the intention of your covenant. Do you believe God has called you to live together in love?

Couple: We Do.

Celebrant: Will you remain faithful to each other, affirming this relationship above all others?

Couple: We Will.

Celebrant: Will you nurture each other's ability to grow in maturity and wisdom within this relationship?

Couple: We Will.

Celebrant: Will you do all in your power to make your life together a witness to the love of God in the world?

Couple: We Will.

Celebrant: Celebrant: N will you take N, to live together in a covenant, reflecting God's love as long as you both shall live?

First person I Will. (question then posed to 2nd person)

Celebrant: Will you who witness these promises, do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their commitment?

All We Will.

Celebrant: The Lord be with you.

All And also with you.

Celebrant: Let us Pray.

O gracious and everloving God, You have created us in your image. Hear our prayers for N and N who now celebrate before You their covenantal relationship; increase their faith in You and in each other; give them grace to keep the promises that they make to each other and to You; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

All: Amen

Readings from Holy Scriptures

One or more passages are read. If there is to be Communion, a passage from the Gospel is always read. Suggested:

I Samuel 18: 1.3-4; II Samuel 1:26; Ruth 1:16b-17a; Psalms: 8; 16:5-11; 28:7-11; 34:1-8; 36:5-10; 67; Ephesians 7:14-21

I John 4:7-16; I Corinthians 13:1-13; John 15:9-12

A homily or other response to the readings follows.

The Covenant

(N and N face each other, take the right hand of the other and, in turn, say)

In the name of God, I N take you N, to be my beloved companion in life. I solemnly promise to stand beside you and with you always, in times of distress and in times of well-being, in times of adversity and in times of prosperity, in times of joy

“By the grace of God these couples aspire to be lifelong and faithful in mutuality and support through their covenant.”

“The church celebrates and affirms that which already exists. It is the two persons who minister to each other and bless God – that is, give thanks to God for their mutual love and their covenant with one another.”

and in times of sorrow. I will live with you and love you as long as we both shall live.

Celebrant: Bless, O Lord, these (---) that are visible signs of the vows by which N and N have bound themselves to each other in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
(blessing a tangible and suitable symbol of the covenant relationship.)

All: Amen

(Exchange of symbols): N, I give you this (---) as a symbol of my vow; receive and treasure it as a pledge of my love for you.

Celebrant: Now that N and N have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, I declare that they are united to each other in a covenant reflecting God’s love, in the Name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (or, in the Name of the Holy One who creates, redeems and sanctifies.) Let us uphold them in this covenant.
(the couple joining hands)

All: Amen

The Prayers

(A selection of the following or other prayers, may be used) Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of all grace, look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon N and N, whom you have unified in love.

All: Amen

Celebrant: Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy.

All: Amen

Celebrant: Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other’s forgiveness and Yours.

All: Amen

Celebrant: Make their life together a sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.

All: Amen

Celebrant: Enhance their relationship with joy and beauty, that their families and friends may rejoice with them.

All: Amen

Celebrant: Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others.

All: Amen

Celebrant: Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all Your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by Your grace, that Your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven, where, with Your Son and the Holy Spirit, You live and reign in perfect unity and love, now and forever.

All: Amen

Celebrant: May the Holy One, who at creation made all persons in the image of God and looked at all that was made and saw that it was very good, keep you as one.
(*placing his/her hands upon the couple, or making the sign of the Cross on their foreheads, or over them*)

All: Amen

Celebrant: May the Savior Jesus Christ, who prayed that we all may be one, be present with you always.

All: Amen

Celebrant: May the Holy spirit, who has given you the will to preserve in your love and in your covenant with each other, strengthen your bond.

All: Amen

(*The couple say together*) We thank you, most gracious God, for blessing our covenant together in Christ's name and presence. Lead us further into companionship with each other and with You. Give us grace to live together in love and fidelity, caring for one another. Strengthen us all our days, and bring us to that Holy Table where, with those we love, we will feast forever in Your heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

The Peace

Celebrant: The Peace of the Lord be always with you.

All: And also with you.

(*Offertory: the couple may present the bread and wine; The following Proper Preface may be used.*)

The Eucharist

You created us to share in Your divine life, and forming us in Your image You called us to live in harmony with You and all creation; through the unity of one person with another You teach us that

Celebrant: love is our origin, our constant calling, and our fulfillment in heaven.

All: Amen

Post-Communion prayer, Celebrant: O God, the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious; we give You thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of Your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit, N and N, now joined in solemn covenant, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love You, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior.

All: Amen

Final Blessing

Celebrant: Let us bless the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

(*A hymn may be sung or instrumental music played.*) (Quotations are from Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, O.U.P, New York, 1980.)



BOOK REVIEW

Celtic Christian Communities: Live the Tradition

Ian Bradley
(Northstone, Woodlake Books, 2000)

Reviewed by John Hodgins

This is the fourth book by Ian Bradley to deal with Celtic Christianity. It comes with a confession as well as some deeper analysis of the Celtic phenomenon which has been popularized during the 1990s. In the context of the current revival, not to say mania, for all things Celtic, the author admits to having himself been caught up in what he calls “over-romantic and uncritical enthusiasm.”

With some distance and much more study he has concluded that for all the recent interest, “Celtic Christianity was not radically different from other early medieval inculturations of Christianity, be they Anglo-Saxon, Roman, Continental or Eastern Orthodox” (p.xi).

In his balanced and yet very positive assessment of the whole range of Celtic practices, Bradley treats such matters as penance, pastoral care, the monastic model and the communion of saints as well as our focus: liturgy and worship.

With respect to liturgy, chapter four deals with some of the distinctive features in Celtic public and monastic worship. First of all, the author admits that no texts from the ‘golden age’ of Celtic Christianity (mid-fifth to mid-seventh centuries A.D.) have been unearthed. One of the earliest texts is the Stowe Missal (circa A.D. 800) which according to Bradley “follows the framework of the Roman ordinary of the mass with some Gallican and Spanish features” (p. 124).

In fact, contrary to the popular notion of Celtic liturgy as largely “lifeaffirming” and naturalistic, the actual Celtic texts seem to be much more focused upon the themes of sin and judgment than on the affirmation of the natural world. With these correctives, Bradley rounds off his Celtic explorations by offering a scholarly yet popular insight into the reality of Celtic Christian faith and practice. ☒

John Hodgins is Review Editor for *Liturgy Canada* and the pastor of Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Chatham, Ontario. He is a member of the Liturgy Canada Executive.

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