

On Blessings, Same-Sex Covenants, and Pastoral Response

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Summary:

This brief essay was published in February 2001 by the Diocese of New Westminster in the fourth set of theological papers written for the Dialogue on Same-Sex Unions. Dr. Crockett was responding to the question, “What Would It Mean for the Church to Bless Same-Sex Unions?”

The author summarizes the meaning of “blessing”, finding that in the Bible and early Christian practice blessing meant giving praise and thanks to God for someone or something. When persons are blessed, praise and thanksgiving is offered to God for the lives of these persons, and God’s blessing is sought so that they can fulfill their created purpose. To bless same-sex relationships in the church is to ground them in the pattern of God’s covenant relationship to humanity, to call them into faithful covenant partnership, and to provide support and responsibility for them within the body of Christ.

What is meant by the “blessing” of human relationships in church?

In Tradition, Blessing = Thanks to God

In Jewish tradition and in early Christian practice when a blessing is recited it is not the person or the object which is blessed but it is God who is blessed. A good example is the Jewish blessing for food, which begins “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, for you nourish the universe.”¹ In the **Song of Zechariah** we have an example in the New Testament of the blessing of a person which follows this same form. Zechariah blesses his son John by blessing God for the covenant of salvation:

”Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David. ... You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins” (Lk.1:68-69, 73).

Blessing and thanksgiving are really the same thing in Jewish tradition and early Christian practice. The clearest example of this in Christian practice is the Eucharistic Prayer, which has its origin in Jewish blessing prayers over the bread and the cup of wine. We speak of this prayer as “The Great Thanksgiving” because the bread and wine are blessed by giving thanks to God for creation and redemption. *Blessing is, first of all, to give praise and thanks to God for someone or something.*

Blessing and the Fulfillment of Creation

The act of blessing is rooted in the doctrine of creation. Blessing is about the fullness and wholeness of life which God intends for creation. The meaning of blessing is summed up in the Hebrew word *shalom*, which we translate into English as peace or well-being. In the Biblical understanding, there is nothing which comes from the Creator's hand which is not holy. For those who seek God's blessing it is *a prayer for the fulfillment of God's creative purpose in their lives*.

The Church's Blessing

The church's blessing does not make something or someone holy. It acknowledges that they are created by God and belong to God. By offering praise and thanksgiving to God the church prays that they may fulfill the purposes for which God created them or the vocation to which God has called them. When persons are blessed, praise and thanksgiving is offered to God for the lives of these persons and God's blessing is sought so that they can fulfill their created purpose, either in their particular vocation or for the particular stage or situation in their lives for which they seek a blessing. This is what is meant by the "blessing" of human relationships in church.

The Marriage Blessing

The nuptial blessing in the marriage service provides an excellent example of these principles: blessing as thanks; blessing as a prayer for the fulfillment of one's created purpose. The first of the two forms for the nuptial blessing offered in The Book of Alternative Services has a form similar to that of the **Song of Zechariah**. It begins, like the Eucharistic Prayer, by giving thanks to God. God is blessed. The prayer of blessing continues by invoking the blessing of God upon the couple: "Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life. We thank you, also, for consecrating the union of man and woman in his name. By the power of your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of your blessing upon this man and this woman ..."² The blessing of a marriage, however, needs to be distinguished from the marriage covenant itself. The blessing does not create the marriage union. It is the couple themselves who enter into this union. The act of blessing is the church's prayer blessing God for the union and asking God's blessing on the couple in their life together.

Blessings of Same-Sex Unions in Church History

Are there precedents for the blessing of same-sex unions in the history of the church? One author, John Boswell, thought so. In his book Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe,³ Boswell examined several medieval manuscripts which contain liturgical rites for "the making of brothers" or "sisters" (the Greek word is *adelphopoiesis*). These are traditional rites in Greek Christianity. There are also similar rituals in medieval western Europe. Boswell interprets these rites as blessings of same-sex unions. He provides the Greek text and English translations of a representative group of these rites in his book. Like the marriage rite they involve a lifelong commitment, but there is no mention of sexual union. Furthermore, married persons and monks could participate in these rites. It is unlikely, therefore, that these rites were intended as blessings for same-sex unions. What is much more likely is that they were intended as kinship rites. In premodern societies in both east and west there were many forms of what we might call

“voluntary” kinship relationships, that is relationships that were not created by birth but by ritual action or the making of a solemn promise or covenant. The rites that Boswell examined were most likely intended for such relationships.⁴

What is meant by homosexual “unions”? Is this the same as marriage?

What is the best way to describe same-sex unions? At least five models have been suggested:

1. **Contract.** There is now civil legislation in various constituencies which offer legal safeguards for gay couples. From a theological point of view, however, “contract” is an inadequate model for describing same-sex unions because it implies purely legal obligations between the partners.
2. **Marriage.** A case can be made for describing same-sex unions as marriages. This is still highly debated on theological, legal, and other grounds. Those who make a case for describing same-sex unions as marriages argue that they involve the same life-commitment as marriage and that companionship is the primary purpose of marriage. Those who make a case against describing same-sex unions as marriage argue that in the Bible, in tradition, and in civil law [in many jurisdictions], marriage is by definition a union between persons of the opposite sex. To describe same-sex unions as marriages would require a re-definition of marriage in civil and church law. They also argue that the purpose of procreation cannot be separated from the purpose of companionship in marriage.⁵
3. **Religious Profession.** “Religious Profession” is the rite used when a monk or nun makes his or her life vows. Some contemporary rites for the blessing of same-sex unions use the form for the making of monastic vows as their model. This does imply a life commitment, but in the case of monastic vows it also implies the vow of chastity.
4. **Friendship.** Alan Bray suggests friendship as a model for the blessing of same-sex unions and proposes either that a form for the recognition of homosexual friendship might take place in the context of the Eucharist or that kinship rites such as those examined by Boswell might provide a model.⁶
5. **Covenant Partnership.** “Covenant,” in contrast to “contract” implies personal as well as legal obligations. It is a concept which has deep roots in the Bible and in Christian tradition. It implies faithfulness and a lifetime commitment between the partners. It also implies a relationship between the partners and God and between the partners and the covenant community. There are a variety of covenant partnerships in the biblical tradition.

History of “Covenant”

In the ancient Near East and in ancient Israel covenants gave shape to social and religious life. In the Hebrew scriptures and in ancient Near Eastern texts we find different kinds of covenants. Covenants were solemnly initiated. This could take a variety of forms. Oaths were sometimes sworn, witnesses were called upon, and covenants were often sealed by a common meal.⁷ Once established, the covenant created a bond between the partners. The covenant bond was intended to create harmony and peace between the participants. Mutual faithfulness is the mark of a

covenant relationship. “Covenant” is a central concept in the Bible. Unlike a legal contract, which is limited to legal obligations and claims, a covenant relates the partners to each other as whole persons. It is based on a relationship of trust which sets the partners free for each other and for service to God and the community.

The Covenant with God in the Bible

In the Hebrew scriptures God’s relationship with Israel is described as a covenant relationship. This covenant partnership between God and the people of Israel sets the pattern for all other covenant relationships within the community. The covenant relationship between God and the people is grounded in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness towards Israel. The covenant bond is a bond of mutual loyalty which is rooted in God’s faithfulness and implies faithfulness on the part of the covenant people.

The Marriage Covenant in the Bible

The marriage union is a central example of a covenant relationship in scripture. In the Hebrew scriptures the covenant relationship between God and Israel is compared with the marriage union and in the New Testament the marriage union is compared with the unity between Christ and the church (Hos.2:19-20; Jer.2:2-3; Ezek.16:8; Eph.5:31-32). The marriage union is more than a legal agreement between the partners. It creates a covenant partnership which is solemnly initiated and binds the partners to one another in a lifelong union. The theology of marriage, therefore, can cast light on the meaning of same-sex unions. By the same token, the marriage rite can serve as a model for the blessing of other covenant partnerships.

Same-Sex Covenants in the Bible

There are two same-sex covenants mentioned in the Bible, the covenants between David and Jonathan and between Ruth and Naomi, but these stop short of explicit sexual intimacy:

“The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ... Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul (1 Sam.18:1,3). After Jonathan’s death, David laments: “Greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam.1:26).

“Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die - there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’” (Ru.1:16-17).

Marriage and Same-Sex Unions: One Theologian’s Argument

In her chapter entitled “Christian Marriage and Homosexual Monogamy” in the book Ourselves, Our Souls, and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God,⁸ Cynthia Crysdale explores the theology of marriage and asks what it might contribute to our understanding of same-sex unions, while leaving open the question whether same-sex unions are best described as marriages or not.

Crysdale distinguishes between marriage as a social institution with its changing social roles, expectations, and customs, and the theological values which undergird it. One of the most basic

values of marriage is that it calls two persons into a relationship which transcends their individuality. Crysdale understands this vocation to self-transcendence as built into the nature of sexuality itself, so that sexual intimacy without commitment and growth is a denial of the nature of sexuality.

“In addition,” she points out, “this challenge to self-transcendence has a religious dimension. The point of marriage (and its sexual intimacy) is to draw persons out of themselves in order to grow closer to God. Self-transcendence is not just in the interests of the other partner, but also that each might become transformed into a deeper communion with the divine.” Furthermore,

“an adequate theology of marriage must take account of sin. Married, covenanted love is not exempt from hurt and injustice. Thus the religious dimension of marriage includes redemption and reconciliation. Without grace, without the gift of healing and renewal and forgiveness, no potential encounter of transformation will reach its fulfillment. ... In sum, sexual pairing is oriented toward long-term commitment and self-transcendence, and its potential is only fulfilled by ongoing acceptance of the grace of God. ...

The institution of matrimony has always existed as a framework within which this ideal of commitment can be carried out. The openly proclaimed commitment and faith of a couple, combined with the support of a faithful and being-redeemed community, provide a public structure whereby promise-keeping has accountability and within which the oscillations of sin and forgiveness will not break the bond.”⁹

Crysdale then asks whether this theology of marriage can illuminate our understanding of same-sex unions. Her response is that if a same-sex partnership involves the same elements of commitment, self-transcendence, struggle with sin and acceptance of grace, why deny it an institution like marriage and the support of the community of faith within which transformative growth can take place. Persons in such covenant partnerships are called in the same way as other Christians to follow Jesus in faithful discipleship and to embody in their relationships the core gospel values of love, fidelity, conversion to the reign of God, love of sinners, and acceptance of those rejected by society.

What might constitute the church’s pastoral response to same-sex unions?

Sin or Grace?

If all homosexual relationships are regarded as inherently sinful and contrary to the will of God; then the church’s pastoral response to homosexual persons could not include the blessing of same sex-unions. If, on the other hand, the homosexual orientation is seen as an expression of the diversity within God’s creation; then gay and lesbian Christians need to find a way of expressing their sexuality which is consistent with God’s covenant relationship with humanity and the Christian call to discipleship. They need to find a way of expressing their sexuality which is ethically responsible and which can become a means of grace for them. From this perspective, the blessing of same-sex unions provide a pastoral means by which gay couples could enter into faithful lifelong partnerships with the blessing and support of the

Christian community and allow them to fulfill their vocations as Christians within the body of Christ.

Already there are many gay and lesbian couples who have entered into such covenant partnerships without the explicit blessing of the church. Is the church to regard such couples as living a lie, as blind to their sin, or can the church see in these couples witnesses to God's covenant faithfulness and find in their relationships signs of God's grace? If the church is able to find in these covenant partnerships a sign of grace rather than a sign of sin; then the blessing of such relationships could become a means of pastoral support for deepening the Christian life of the partners.

Commitment and Responsibility

To bless same-sex relationships in the church is to ground them in the pattern of God's covenant relationship to humanity, to call them into faithful covenant partnership, and to provide support and responsibility for them within the body of Christ. Such a pastoral response to same-sex unions provides a fundamental challenge to the sexual mores of our society in which sexual liberation often implies individual sexual gratification and promiscuity. It provides a challenge to gay couples which is rooted in gospel values and provides a community of support which can foster the kind of transformation which the Gospel calls for. It can lead not only to deeper personal relationships, but to a deepened relationship to God and a deeper sense of responsibility to the wider community of the church and society.

¹ R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming, ed., Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed, 3d rev. ed. (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1987), 10.

² BAS, 534.

³ New York: Villard Books, 1994.

⁴ For a critique of Boswell's interpretation see Alan Bray, "Friendship, the Family and Liturgy: A Rite for Blessing Friendship in Traditional Christianity," Theology and Sexuality 13 (September 2000): 15-33; also Elizabeth A.R. Brown, Claudia Rapp, and Brent D. Shaw, "Ritual Brotherhood in Ancient and Medieval Europe: A Symposium," Traditio 52 (1997), 261-381.

⁵ For the arguments pro and con see Andrew Sullivan, ed., Same-Sex Marriage: Pro and Con: A Reader (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum, ed., Same-Sex Marriage: The Moral and Legal Debate (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997); William N. Eskridge, The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

⁶ Bray, "Friendship," 31-33.

⁷ See e.g., Gen.31:44-54.

⁸ Charles Hefling, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1996), 89-104.

⁹ Cynthia Crysdale, in Hefling, 96.