

# Text in Context: The Blessing of Same-Gender Covenants in the Diocese of New Westminster

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When *The Book of Alternative Services* was prepared, it was thought appropriate to accompany each rite with a brief historical, theological and pastoral commentary. The principle behind this decision is a sound one. Ritual arises from a community's encounter with the saving mystery of the gospel and that encounter is coloured by the community's context.

The reflections which follow are a preliminary attempt to provide a theological commentary on the proposed rite for the blessing of same-gender covenants in the Diocese of New Westminster. Rather than give the history of the rite's development and reflections on its pastoral application, my comments will attempt to set the rite within the context of the mystery of the gospel and how this rite both differs from the rite of marriage and yet celebrates the saving work of God in human relationships.

*1) What do we understand a blessing to be and to mean?*

J. G. Davies in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* states that a blessing is “. . . an authoritative declaration of divine favour addressed to persons” (Davies 1986, 93). This succinct definition, however, does not do justice to the theological complexity of the issue we presently face.

The fundamental question is whether a blessing *imparts* a divine quality to a person or persons that is absent or whether the blessing *releases* the divine qualities inherent in the person or persons being blessed so that these qualities may work for the enhancement of God's reign. It is this latter view that informed the compilers of the proposed rite.

We bless people not to increase their spiritual dignity but to give thanks for the role they have been called to play within the reign of God and thus to release them to play their part. (*Occasional Celebrations* 1992, 119)

This view has been influenced by a recovery of the understanding of blessing in the Hebrew Bible.

The Old Testament . . . shows an evolution in the idea of blessing. The starting point is a primitive exchange with mysterious forces that bestow a power for good and for evil; but blessing eventually becomes the expression of a spiritual bond linking human beings with God, whose benefits they experience throughout their lives and to whom they feel urged to respond with praise and thanksgiving. (Jounel 1988, 265)

Such blessings have their own liturgical shape: (a) “a brief prayer addressing God”, (b) “a remembrance of God’s creating and saving power” and (c) “a statement of the reason for praise” (*Occasional Celebrations* 1992, 124).

Every prayer of blessing is thanksgiving for creation and redemption, offered in petition for the fulfilment of the divine purpose in God’s people and in all the world. (*Occasional Celebrations* 1992, 120)

In contrast to this older and scriptural view of blessing is the dominant Western view of blessing that emerged in full flower by C.E. 950.

The prayer of praise or invocation . . . paid homage to the sovereign lordship of the creator and of him whom the creator had established as the king of the universe. But the practice was not without ambiguity. Blessings could become rites whose primary purpose was to rescue persons and things from the dominion of that the demon was regarded as exercising over the world. (Jouel 1988, 268)

In the Romano-Germanic pontifical (*circa* C.E. 950) the sense of praise and invocation had given way to the view that “. . . no object can have a cultic use unless it has first been withdrawn from the profane world by a preceding blessing” (Jouel 1988, 272). This shift would have a significant impact upon subsequent Western theology.

Rather than a blessing being an act of thanksgiving for the gifts of God already bestowed upon us in persons and things, blessing came to be understood as the withdrawal of a person or object from the profane sphere and re-locating the recipient of the blessing into an appropriate quadrant of the sacred realm. The Church ceased to celebrate the goodness of the whole creation and began to differentiate between sacred and profane.

The proposed rite chooses to celebrate God’s gifts present in the whole Christian community, whether gay or straight. The rite gives thanks to God for fidelity in a world marked by promiscuity, for reconciliation in a society marked by social, economic and ethnic separation and for the diversity of gifts manifested in the Body of Christ in the midst of a culture tempted by the allure of homogeneity. Without losing sight of the reality of human sin, the rite celebrates the redemption offered freely in Jesus Christ who calls us into relationships of self-giving love.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death --- even death on a cross. (Philippians 2.1-8)

## II) What kind of relationships shall we bless?

All human relationships, whether sexual or not, whether life-long or not, have the *potential* to be agents of the divine purpose. Some relationships are limited by terms of office or purpose. Other relationships are life-long in intent, even though the ‘death’ of such relationships is a recognized reality of community life. Regardless of the specific characteristics of the relationship, the act of blessing does not make the relationship *more* holy but rather, in giving thanks to God and invoking God’s holy name, *releases* the relationship to realize its full potential as an expression of God’s *shalom*.

The act of blessing (a) recognizes the pre-existent reality of the relationship, (b) confers the community’s authority upon the recipients to conduct themselves as formal and public participants in such a relationship, (c) establishes a communal context of responsibilities, accountabilities and privileges commonly associated with such relationships and (d) petitions God to endow the participants in the relationship with the grace necessary to fulfill the divine purpose of such a relationship within the community. Blessing rituals have elements that are *common* to all similar rites and *proper* to the specific situation. Common elements are unitive, expressing the Christian character of the event, while proper elements serve to differentiate the particular rite from its ritual peers.

Even when common texts and actions are present in two different rites, however, one cannot assume that they signify the same meaning. The placement of the text or action within the overall structure of the rite, the identity and/or role of the person who recites the text and performs the action as well as the community’s involvement must always be considered. Context, as many theologians have said, is everything.

## III) How is the proposed rite distinct from the marriage rite?

First, it is only proper to acknowledge that the proposed rite shares a similar structure to marriage, but this similarity is one which reflects the common structure of blessing rites: (a) introductory rite, (b) liturgy of the word, (c) liturgy of the blessing and (d) concluding rite (*Occasional Celebrations* 1992, 121-122). A perusal of rites in *Occasional Celebrations* and *The Book of Alternative Services* will indicate that this structure characterizes the majority of the rites. Therefore it is not surprising that the proposed rite follows such a structure.

Second, the proposed rite includes some readings that are also used wholly or partially in the marriage rite: Psalm 112, Romans 12.9-21, 1 Corinthians 13.1-13, 1 John 4.7-21, Matthew 5.1-16 and John 15.9-17. None of these readings, however, can be considered *anamnetic*, i.e., texts that evoke particular associations between the present action and scriptural antecedents. Rather they are *parenetic*, i.e., texts that evoke qualities considered appropriate for participants in the rite and in the relationship the rite celebrates.

It is somewhat unfortunate that 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s reflection on the nature of Christian love, has been trivialized in recent years by its close association with marriage and romantic love. The text is, in fact, written to a church in conflict and is an exhortation to self-giving love, even when the community is divided by theological debate.

These similarities considered, the proposed rite differs from the marriage rite in several significant elements.

1) It is generally acknowledged that the ministers of the sacrament of marriage are a heterosexual couple. They marry each other; the presider blesses what they have vowed. In the proposed rite the couple is not heterosexual but homosexual. The covenant, while sharing some characteristics of marital relationships, is *sui generis*, unique and not to be confused with marriage.

2) In marriage the exchange of consents is deemed an essential element of the rite (Stevenson 1982, 205, 210). Such an exchange of consents is not deemed necessary in the proposed rite. Although the participants in the proposed rite are expected to enter this covenant freely, the implicit and explicit power differentials and impediments that gave rise historically to the exchange of consent in the marriage rite do not pertain here.

3) In the marriage rite the community is given the opportunity to voice any legal and canonical objections to the blessing of the marriage. In the proposed rite no such opportunity is provided. The introductory rubrics, however, are clear that the presbyter or bishop who presides may not bless the covenant if either of the participants is legally married.

4) In marriage the presiding minister declares the couple to be married, a declaration more civil than ecclesial in origin. There is no such declaration in the proposed rite.

5) A comparison of the introductory declaration of the marriage rite of *The Book of Alternative Services* and the declaration that introduces the exchange of promises in the proposed rite will reveal significant differences in the understanding of the rites.

### *The Book of Alternative Services*

Dear friends, we have come together in the presence of God to witness the marriage of *N* and *N*, and to rejoice with them.

Marriage is a gift of God and a means of his grace, in which man and woman become one flesh. It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love, they shall grow together and be united in that love, as Christ is united with his Church.

The union of man and woman in heart, body and mind is intended for their mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love [and that they may be blessed in the procreation, care, and upbringing of children].

In marriage, husband and wife give themselves to each other, to care for each other in good times and in bad. They are linked to each other's families, and they begin a new life together in the community.

It is a way of life that all should reverence, and none should lightly undertake.

*The Proposed Rite*

Covenanting is an ancient form of promise-making, a public declaration of a commitment accompanied by an oath and symbols, that binds the parties into a relationship that endures, even when one party struggles to keep the promises made. From the beginning of creation God has chosen to enter into covenants with human beings.

God's covenant with Israel brought the people out of slavery and exile into the land of promise. God's covenant with the Christian people brings us into a new community where there is no male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but one people united in Christ.

All covenants, whether between God and human communities or between family members and friends, have the potential to be life-giving signs of God's love and fidelity. They are living reminders of God's promises to us and sources of hope to others.

Today we gather to witness and to bless the public commitment of N. and N. to such a covenant.

6) The promises of the proposed rite focus on mutual love and edification rather than the "taking" language of the marriage rite.

7) Finally, the actual blessing in the proposed rite is neither derivative of nor similar to the blessing texts of the marriage rite.

8) Whereas the marriage rite presumes marriage to be a conventional social relationship that has the potential for being a sign of God's reign, the proposed rite understands the blessing of same-gender covenants to be an act of public witness and resistance in a world that continues to marginalize gay and lesbian Christians.

In your mercy you befriend those who wander in loneliness and shame, those oppressed because of difference . . . (Second collect)

In your mercy you call us out of solitary darkness and redeem us to love you with a whole heart, soul, mind, and strength . . . (Third collect)

God's covenant with Israel brought the people out of slavery and exile into the land of promise. (Declaration)

We give you thanks and praise for N and N, creating in them the desire for intimacy and companionship, calling them out of isolation and shame, strengthening them against prejudice and fear, and embracing them in a family of friends and loved ones. (Blessing)

The proposed rite concludes in an act of corporate solidarity. The congregation, couple and presider join in a litany of blessing, witness and commitment, seeking God's favour on the entire assembly as they go forth to live as agents of the reign of God.

#### *IV) Concluding Comments*

I hope that these comments, preliminary as they are, will guide the assessors in their evaluation of the proposed rite. Despite some similarities to the marriage rite, the underlying theology and the distinctive liturgical elements define a covenant that is unique and that poses no threat, if any ever existed, to marriage as the sacramental union of a heterosexual couple. Rather this rite attempts to liturgical expression to a new thing that God is doing in our midst, life-long stable and covenanted relationships of gay and lesbian disciples of Christ. May the day come soon that the adjective 'proposed' is replaced with 'authorized'.

[Gamaliel said], “. . . if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them --- in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5.38b-39a)

#### *Sources cited*

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