

# III. FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

## Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships

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# III. Faith, Hope, and Love

## Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships

### Preface

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The Episcopal Church has been seeking, in various ways and over the last 30 years, to celebrate the goodness of God, the grace of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our brothers and sisters who are gay and lesbian. A series of General Convention resolutions during that time (1976-A069; 1985-Do82; 1991-A104; 1994-Co20; 1994-Co42; 1997-Co03; 2000-Do39; 2003-Co51) has now led the Church to ask the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for the blessing of same-sex relationships (Resolution 2009-Co56). In response to that call, we offer this essay as a theological resource and invite the wider Church to reflect with us on how God is working today in the committed relationships of same-sex couples.

For generations the Church has celebrated and blessed the faithful, committed, lifelong, monogamous relationships of men and women united in the bonds of Holy Matrimony. In The Episcopal Church, the marriage relationship is held in high regard, included as a “sacramental rite” by some,<sup>1</sup> and as one of the seven sacraments by others. The Commission has discovered in its work in response to Resolution 2009-Co56 that any consideration of the blessing of faithful, committed, lifelong, monogamous relationships of same-sex couples cannot ignore the parallels to marriage, whether from practical, theological, or liturgical perspectives. While this reality may well be inviting the Church to deeper conversation regarding marriage, the similarities between marriage and the blessing of same-sex unions also illuminate our discussions in this resource.

For some Episcopalians, this material will resonate well with their long-standing experience and theological reflection; for others, the call from the 2009 General Convention represents a new and perhaps perplexing moment in the life of our Church. We take that difference seriously. To the best of our ability, given the mandate of Resolution 2009-Co56 to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for the blessing of same-sex relationships, we address those who are eager to receive this theological resource while also acknowledging that others have deep reservations about proceeding in this direction. All of us belong equally to The Episcopal Church and to the worldwide Anglican Communion and, most of all, to the universal Body of Christ. This theological resource honors the centrality of Scripture among Anglicans, interpreted in concert with the historical traditions of the Church and in the light of reason.

An overview introduces and summarizes questions and major theological themes. Four sections follow the overview, each expanding on the themes. While readers may engage with this material in a number of ways, the order of the four sections, which we recommend following, reflects a particular theological approach to this work. Section one affirms the understanding that everything we do as Christians is meant to express the

<sup>1</sup> “An Outline of the Faith,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 860. Hereafter this edition of the Prayer Book is cited as BCP.

Church's call to participate in God's own mission in the world. The second section offers theological reflections on blessing. The third considers blessing same-sex couples within the broader sacramental life of the Church, especially in light of the theological significance of covenantal relationship. The fourth section reflects on the challenge of living into our baptismal bond with each other in the midst of disagreements over biblical interpretation.

In researching and preparing this essay, we discovered and recalled an abundance of resources in Scripture and the traditions of the Church that have informed our response to Resolution 2009-C056. We now invite the wider Church to further study and conversation, mindful that the apostle Paul described our shared life in Christ as one marked by faith, hope, and love, the greatest of these being love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

## Overview: Theological Reflection on Same-Sex Relationships

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I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
— 1 Corinthians 1:4–7

In 2009, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church asked for theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same-gender relationships (Resolution C056). In response to that call, we invite the Church to reflect on the theological material collected and developed here for that purpose. In our theological reflection, we have kept in view more than 30 years of deliberation at General Convention on these matters, especially Resolution 2000-D039, which identified certain characteristics the Church expects of couples living in marriage and other lifelong, committed relationships: “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.”<sup>2</sup> We understand couples who manifest this manner of life, with God's grace, to have entered into a covenant with each other, which presents a rich opportunity for theological reflection.<sup>3</sup>

The theological themes in this resource, rooted in baptism, eucharist, and the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, offer ways to consider how the Church may appropriately bless lifelong, committed covenantal relationships of same-sex couples. Such covenantal relationships can reflect God's own gracious covenant with us in Christ, manifest the fruits of the Spirit in holiness of life, and model for the whole community the love of neighbor in the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation.

As the Commission responded to the charge to collect and develop theological resources, we focused our attention on four areas of consideration. The first is *mission*: what does the Church believe these blessings will contribute to God's own work of redeeming and reconciling love in the world? Second, what does the Church believe is happening when it pronounces God's *blessing*? Third, what does the Church believe are the distinguishing marks of a holy *covenant*? And, finally, what is the relationship between *Christian unity* and our differing approaches to *biblical interpretation* regarding same-sex relationships? This overview introduces and summarizes these areas, and the subsequent sections expand on each of them in turn.

<sup>2</sup> Texts of these resolutions are included in the appendix to these resources. For a fuller discussion of the history of General Convention resolutions and reports on these issues, see the appendix in *To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report ¶135* (New York: The Office of Communication, The Episcopal Church Center, 2005), 63–121.

<sup>3</sup> As Paul Marshall points out, the marriage rite of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* uses the language of “covenant” (423). Marshall notes that covenant-making is a key biblical motif, which makes it useful in our theological reflection on the committed relationships of all couples (*Same-Sex Unions: Stories and Rites* [New York: Church Publishing, 2004], 40).

## A Focus on Mission

Our starting point is Holy Baptism, which incorporates us into the Body of Christ and commissions us to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation in the world (2 Corinthians 5:17–19). The purpose of this reconciling mission is nothing less than the restoration of all people to “unity with God and with each other in Christ.”<sup>4</sup> One of the ways Christians participate in this mission is by witnessing to Christ in how we live in our closest relationships. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus said, “if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

As Christians, then, our closest relationships are not solely private. The Church has always affirmed the public and communal dimension of our covenantal relationships. The character of our love, both its fruitfulness and its failures, affects others around us. The Church, therefore, commissions a couple bound by sacred vows in Holy Matrimony to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation. Such relationships are set apart for precisely that divine purpose: to bear witness to and participate in the creating, redeeming, and sustaining love of God.

This missional character of covenantal blessing, reflected in both Scripture and the historical traditions of the Church, deserves renewed attention today. The 2000 General Convention contributed to this renewal when it passed Resolution D039, which identified monogamy, fidelity, holy love, and other characteristics of lifelong, committed relationships. Significantly, that resolution was framed as a way to enable the Church to engage more effectively in its mission. Many in The Episcopal Church have witnessed these characteristics in the committed relationships of same-sex couples. That recognition can, and in many places already has, broadened the understanding of the Church’s mission of participating in God’s reconciling work in the world.

## A Theology of Blessing

We understand the celebration and blessing of committed, monogamous, lifelong, faithful same-sex relationships as part of the Church’s work of offering outward and visible signs of God’s grace among us. “Blessing” exhibits a multifaceted character, yet the Church has always affirmed that blessing originates in God, the giver of every good gift. The Church participates in God’s blessing of committed, covenantal couples in three intertwined aspects: first, we thank God for the grace already discerned in the lives of the couple; second, we ask God’s continual favor so that the couple may manifest more fully the fruits of the Spirit in their lives; and third, we seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit as the Church commissions the couple to bear witness to the gospel in the world.

This threefold character of blessing, therefore, acknowledges what is already present — God’s goodness. The Church’s blessing also sets the relationship apart for God’s purposes and prays for the divine grace the couple will need to fulfill those purposes. Just as the blessing of bread and wine at the eucharist sets them apart from ordinary usage and designates them for a particular, sacred purpose, so the public affirmation of divine blessing in a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart from other types of relationship.

The Church expects the blessing of a covenantal relationship to bear the fruits of divine grace in particular ways — and always with God’s continual help and favor. This makes the couple accountable to the community of faith as well as to God and to one another. The community, in turn, is held accountable for encouraging, supporting, and nurturing a blessed relationship as the couple seeks to grow together in holiness of life. Through its participation in the blessing of covenantal relationships, the Church is blessed by the goodness of God, who continues to offer blessings in abundance, regardless of merit or circumstance. As we live more fully into our call to discern, pronounce, seek, and return blessing wherever it may be found, we find that we ourselves are blessed with joy.

<sup>4</sup> “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 855.

## Covenantal Relationship

Reflecting theologically on same-sex relationships can become an occasion for the Church to reflect more broadly on the significance of covenantal commitment in the life of faith. Both Scripture and our theological traditions invite us to consider, first, the *sacramental character* of covenantal relationships; by this we mean the potential of such relationships to become outward and visible signs of God's grace. And second, covenantal relationships can both reflect and inspire the *eschatological vision* of Christian life. The covenantal commitments we make with each other, in other words, can evoke our desire for union with God, which is our final hope in Christ.

Our understanding of covenant thus derives first and foremost from the gracious covenant God makes with us in Christ. The many types of relational commitments we make carry the potential to reflect and bear witness to that divine covenant. Here we have especially in mind the covenants made by intimate couples in the sacred vows they make to enter into a public, lifelong relationship of faithful monogamy.

Scripture and Christian tradition encourage us to see in these intimate relationships a reflection of God's own desire for us. The long tradition of commentary on the biblical Song of Songs, for example, illustrates this spiritual significance of sexual relationships. Hebrew prophets likewise turned frequently to the metaphor of marriage to describe God's commitment to Israel (Isaiah 62:5), an image the Pauline writer also used to describe the relationship of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21–33).

Covenantal commitments are thus shaped by and can also reflect the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, which the Church celebrates in baptism and eucharist. Intimate couples who live in a sacred covenant find themselves swept up into a grand and risky endeavor: to see if they can find their life in God by giving it to another. This dynamic reflects the baptismal life all of us share as Christians. As we live out our baptismal vows throughout our lives, we are called to follow this pattern of God's self-giving desire and love.

In the eucharist, we recall Christ's willingness to give his life for the world: "This is my body, given for you." When two people give their lives, their bodies, to one another in a lifelong covenant, they can discover and show how in giving ourselves we find ourselves (Matthew 16:25). When the Church pronounces God's blessing on the vows of lifelong fidelity — for different-sex and same-sex couples alike — the Church makes a bold claim: the paschal mystery is the very root and source of life in the couple's relationship.

This sacramental framework in which to reflect on same-sex relationships has, in turn, led us to consider more carefully several other key theological themes: the *vocational* aspect of covenantal relationship; how such a vocation is lived in *Christian households*; the *fruitfulness* of covenantal relationships in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality; and *mutual blessing*, as God's blessing in covenantal relationship becomes a blessing to the wider community.

## Christian Unity and Biblical Interpretation

Baptism binds us to God by binding us to one another. Salvation is inherently social and communal. This bond, furthermore, does not depend on our agreement with one another but instead relies on what God has done and is doing among us. In fact, our unity in God gives us room to disagree safely, ideally without threat of breaking our unity, which is God's own gift. This principle is the very foundation of all covenants, beginning with the covenant between God and God's people, exemplified in baptism, reflected in ordained ministry, lived in vowed religious life and marriage, and encompassing the life of the Church. Our common call as God's people is not to find unanimity in all matters of faith and morals, but to go out into all nations as witnesses to the good news of God in Christ.

Most Christians would, nonetheless, recognize limits to acceptable and legitimate differences. Beyond such limits, unity becomes untenable. Those limits then pose difficult questions: How far is too far? What kind of difference would constitute essential disunity? In the debate over same-sex relationships and biblical interpretation, Episcopalians and other Christians throughout the Anglican Communion have disagreed about the answers to these questions. Some Episcopalians have concluded that blessing such relationships

has gone too far and, acting on their conscience, have parted company with The Episcopal Church, while others who disagree have chosen to remain. As a Church, we continue to take different approaches to interpreting Scripture as we consider same-sex relationships.

We who differ profoundly and yet desire unity more profoundly recall that the Church has held this creative tension in the past. In Acts 15, we see that Paul differed from the community in Jerusalem over whether circumcision and the observation of dietary laws should be required of Gentiles in order for them to be baptized into Christ's Body. This difference was a matter of biblical interpretation. As Church members held the tension between their essential unity and their differences in how they understood Scripture, they found themselves guided by the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, the Church has faced many other similar times of wrestling over differing views of Scripture concerning a wide range of questions: whether vowed religious life takes priority over marriage, the prohibition on lending money at interest, polygamous households, divorce and remarriage, contraception, the institution of slavery, and the role of women in both Church and society, to name just a few. In all these times, the Church has sought to follow the apostolic process of prayerful deliberation, which respects the centrality of Scripture and attends carefully to the Spirit's work among us. This process will not resolve all of our disagreements, but we continue to trust in the unity that comes not from our own efforts but as God's gift to us and for which Christ himself prayed (John 17:11).

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The following four sections expand on all of these theological themes and considerations, and we offer them to the wider Church for ongoing, shared discernment as the Body of Christ. No one perspective or community can fully capture the fullness of the truth into which the Spirit of God continually leads the Church. In this work, then, as in every other matter of concern for the Church's life and mission, we take to heart Paul's reminder that now "we know only in part" while awaiting that day when "the partial will come to an end" (1 Corinthians 13:9–10). In that spirit of humility, in which no one knows fully, we offer this theological resource on the blessing of same-sex relationships, trusting that it reflects a shared faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, inspires hope for that union with God which Christ has promised, and, above all, expresses that love which shall not end (1 Corinthians 13:8).

## 1. The Church's Call: A Focus on Mission

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If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

— 2 Corinthians 5:17–19

The meaning and character of blessing play an important role in our shared calling to participate in God's own mission of reconciling love in the world. Pronouncing divine blessing takes many forms covering a wide range of occasions. When the Church gathers to bless the exchanging of sacred vows in a covenantal relationship, the blessing reflects a threefold action. First, the Church gives thanks for the presence of the Spirit discerned in the lives of the couple. Second, the Church prays for the divine grace and favor the couple will need to live into their commitment to each other with love, fidelity, and holiness of life. And third, the Church commissions the couple to participate in God's own mission in the world. This missional character of

<sup>5</sup> This process of discernment over scriptural interpretation guided by the Holy Spirit has shaped every era in Christian history, including Anglican approaches. See "An Outline of the Faith," BCP, 853–54.

covenantal blessing, reflected in both Scripture and the historical traditions of the Church, deserves renewed attention today. While the Church gives thanks for God’s presence and blessing, the public affirmation of the blessing of a covenantal relationship also sets that relationship apart for a sacred purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sustaining love of God.

God’s promise to Abraham sets the tone for this missional understanding of blessing: “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2b). Through Moses, God’s promise extends to the divine covenant with Israel, a people God chooses to receive divine gifts of protection, guidance, and fruitfulness. In this covenantal relationship, God makes the people of Israel the stewards of these gifts, not for their sake only, but to become a blessing for the world. As God declared to Jacob: “All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring” (Genesis 28:14b). And as God also declared through Isaiah: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

The earliest Christians likewise adopted this missional understanding of covenantal blessing as they recognized that the grace they received in Christ was not for themselves alone but so that they could bear witness to that grace “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus urged this view of the life of faith by reminding his listeners that “no one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:15). In John’s Gospel, Jesus models this divine mission by washing his disciples’ feet. This act of intimate service provided the example his disciples were to follow in blessing others with the same life of service (John 13:14–15); the love God shows for us in Christ, in other words, becomes a blessing for mission and ministry. The covenant of grace God has made with us in Christ thus calls all of us to that life of service: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10).

### Worship and Mission: An Eschatological Vision

Whenever the people of God gather for worship, we return to this foundational view in Scripture: God continues to bless us through our covenantal relationship with Christ, and this blessing enables and empowers us to provide a blessing to others. In all of the Church’s rites, from the Daily Office to the Holy Eucharist, we give thanks for God’s blessings, and we pray for the grace we need to manifest that blessing in the world, to “do the work [God has] given us to do.”<sup>6</sup> This pattern appears in the marriage rite as well, which celebrates God’s blessing on loving commitment, not for the sake of the couple alone, but for the world, which stands in need of such witness to love and faithfulness. In that rite, the assembly prays for the couple, that God will “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.”<sup>7</sup> God’s covenantal blessing empowers the couple as missionaries of grace.

Moreover, the Church blesses and sends in order to lay claim to our part in the fulfillment of salvation history; we collaborate with God as both proclaimers of and instruments for the new creation God is bringing about. “The redemption of the world is not finished, and so human history is not finished. History is going somewhere, and it is not there yet,” one theologian reminds us. “The church exists to be the thing that God is doing, and to become the thing that God will be doing until the End.” What God has done and will continue to do in the life of the Church manifests “not just the inherent goodness of creation but the possibility of new creation, of healing and justice and forgiveness.” And so the Church blesses in order to fulfill its “‘eschatological’ project of becoming the kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Postcommunion Prayer, BCP, 366.

<sup>7</sup> BCP, 429.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hefling, “What Do We Bless and Why?” *Anglican Theological Review* 85:1 (Winter 2003): 91–93.

This eschatological vision of the Church's life of worship and mission carries the potential to deepen our shared reflection on the meaning of blessing itself. In blessing and being blessed, we join in the great work of redemption that God has always been doing, is doing now, and will do until the End. Indeed, this expansive view of blessing, rooted deeply in the covenant God has made with us in Christ, led Paul to declare that God's own mission of reconciliation has been entrusted to all those who have been blessed by this promise of a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17–19).

### Same-Sex Relationships and the Church's Mission

In responding to the call to participate in God's mission in the world, the Church must attend carefully to the particular cultural circumstances in which it proclaims the hope of the gospel. Over the last 60 years in the United States (among other places), social, psychological, and biomedical sciences have contributed to a gradual shift in cultural perspectives on the complexity of sexual orientation and gender identity. The American Psychiatric Association, for example, no longer considers homosexuality to be a pathological condition,<sup>9</sup> which it did in the mid-20th century. Gay and lesbian people now participate openly in nearly every profession and aspect of life. Many openly form stable and enduring relationships and some also raise children in their families. Many churches, including The Episcopal Church, have also discerned in same-sex relationships the same possibility of holiness of life and the fruits of the Spirit that we pray for in those who seek the commitment of marriage and its blessings.<sup>10</sup>

This cultural shift concerning human sexuality bears on the Church's pastoral care and also on its mission. The 2000 General Convention, for example, identified certain characteristics that the Church expects of all couples in lifelong, committed relationships: "fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love that enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God."<sup>11</sup> Significantly, the Convention framed that resolution as a matter of *mission*. Witnessing the Spirit at work in same-sex relationships, just as we do in different-sex relationships, can and in many places already has broadened the Church's understanding of how it participates in God's own reconciling work in the world.

Many gay and lesbian people (among others) who see same-sex couples exchange vows and receive a blessing are moved, likewise, to seek the Church's support for deepening their own commitments and faithfulness. They, in turn, offer their gifts for ministry to the wider community, gifts that contribute to the Church's mission to "restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."<sup>12</sup> When the Church pronounces God's blessing on same-sex couples who are also raising children, those children can understand better the sanctity of their own family, and the family itself can receive the same support and encouragement from the Church that different-sex couples receive for their families. The blessing of same-sex relationships in the community of faith can also become an occasion for reconciliation among estranged family members, including those who have not understood or have even rejected their lesbian and gay relatives.

Heterosexual people may also find their own vocations and ministries strengthened and empowered in those moments of blessing, as they may do at the celebration of a marriage, or at the public profession of commitment to a particular ministry or community. In other words, the gifts lesbians and gay men discern in

<sup>9</sup> "All major professional mental health organizations have gone on record to affirm that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*." From "Let's Talk Facts about Sexual Orientation," produced by the American Psychiatric Association, [http://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Mental%20Illness/Lets%20Talk%20Facts/APA\\_Sexual-Orientation.pdf](http://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Mental%20Illness/Lets%20Talk%20Facts/APA_Sexual-Orientation.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, 24–25. For a broader overview and analysis, see the collection of essays edited by Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> General Convention Resolution 2000–D039. Scripture reflects a similar approach to discerning evidence of divine grace and the Spirit's work when, for example, Jesus uses the analogy of assessing the goodness of a tree based on the kind of fruit it bears (Matthew 7:16–18 and Luke 6:43).

<sup>12</sup> "An Outline of the Faith," BCP, 855.



their own lives and committed relationships are not just for themselves alone. One Episcopal priest has observed, “Over and over again, we see lesbians and gay men, people who would have been hiding in the shadows of our church a generation ago, now coming forward to contribute their gifts, their strength and loyalty and wisdom, freely and openly to the whole community of faith. And heterosexual people who have seen this happening have also been freed to give more generously of themselves.”<sup>13</sup>

Friends of same-sex couples and many others in the general public also take note of these moments of blessing, encountering the expansive and generous reach of gospel welcome. As friends witness the grace of these covenantal commitments, and the generosity of the Church’s embrace, many of them will be drawn to the community of faith, perhaps for the first time or after having left. Such has already been the case in many congregations and dioceses in The Episcopal Church.

### The Challenge of God’s Blessing for Mission

Scripture attests to significant moments in which biblical writers challenged their communities to expand their vision of God’s saving work in the world or in which the writers were themselves challenged by that divine word to see past their present horizons. The ancient Israelites, for example, had to struggle with how far the blessing of their covenantal life would reach. Isaiah urged them to see all the nations — not just their own — streaming to God’s holy mountain (Isaiah 2:1–4). The early Church was no exception to this struggle.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read about Peter’s hesitation to cross traditional boundaries between the clean and the unclean in his encounter with Cornelius, a Roman centurion (Acts 10). In a vision, Peter heard God urging him to eat certain unclean animals in direct disobedience to the injunctions found in Leviticus 11. This vision led Peter to consider anew whether God’s saving work and blessing might be found in places and among particular people he had not before considered possible. When challenged about this expansive vision, Peter declared, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). To those who were startled and perhaps scandalized by the extension of the gospel to Gentiles, Peter asked, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47).<sup>14</sup>

Time after time in the history of Israel and in the early Church, responding to the challenge of God’s extravagant grace and the richness of divine blessing has expanded the mission of God’s people in the world, even beyond where many had previously imagined. The loving faithfulness and covenantal commitment of lesbian and gay couples presents a similar challenge to the Church today. Many throughout The Episcopal Church and other Christian communions have recognized and discerned the Spirit’s presence and work in these same-sex relationships, and are asking God’s people to ponder why we would withhold a public affirmation and declaration of blessing from those who have received the Holy Spirit just as others have. More importantly, however, this moment in The Episcopal Church’s life calls all of us to consider anew the rich blessings we receive by God’s grace in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. These blessings, in turn, animate the ministry of reconciliation that God has given us as ambassadors of the new creation that is unfolding, even now, in our midst.

<sup>13</sup> L. William Countryman, “The Big House of Classic Anglicanism,” from a speech given at the Claiming the Blessing Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, in November 2002 and quoted in *Claiming the Blessing*, the theology statement of the Claiming the Blessing coalition, page 11; <http://www.claimingtheblessing.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Paul describes his confrontation with Peter about these very issues in Galatians 2:1–21.

## 2. The Church's Joy: A Theology of Blessing

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Whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the God of faithfulness.

— Isaiah 65:16

The disciples were continually in the temple blessing God.

— Luke 24:53

“Blessed are you, Lord God, ruler of the universe, who created everything for your glory!” This classic blessing in Jewish tradition sets the tone for any theological reflection on what it means to bless and to receive a blessing. Rather than ourselves, other people, animals, places, or things, God’s people first and foremost bless God, the giver of life and creator of all. Discerning and giving thanks for the countless reasons that we can and should bless God are, therefore, at the heart of the Church’s work in the world. Indeed, at the heart of Christian worship is the eucharist, or “thanksgiving,” in which we lift up the “cup of blessing” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

In Anglican contexts, the Church’s work in the world is shaped by common prayer and worship. In addition to reading the Scriptures and prayerful meditation, Anglicans have always relied on our shared liturgical life for discerning where God is present and how God is calling us to live in the world as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. While God is active always and everywhere, the community of faith gathers to discern God’s activity and make it ever more visible.

Although ordained ministers are called to the Church’s work in a particular way, they share the work with the whole community of the baptized. In their sacramental vocation, ordained ministers lead the community in offering outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace that is present among God’s people. Clergy do not, in other words, “create grace” where there was none to be found already; rather, the whole Body of Christ, in many and various ways, proclaims God’s gracious activity in our midst. This proclamation offers the assurance of God’s grace promised to us in Christ Jesus and offers support as we strive to manifest the fruits of the Spirit in our daily lives.

Many in The Episcopal Church and other Christian communions believe that the celebration and blessing of the covenantal commitment of a same-sex couple also belongs in the Church’s work of offering outward and visible signs of God’s grace. While “blessing” exhibits a multifaceted meaning, it always originates in God, which the Church rightly and daily acknowledges: “We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.”<sup>15</sup>

The Church participates in this fundamental, divine blessing in three related ways: thanking God for God’s goodness and favor; seeking God’s continued favor and grace so that we may manifest more fully that gratitude in our lives; and receiving power from the Holy Spirit to bear witness to that grace in the world. This threefold character of blessing acknowledges what is already present, God’s grace, but it does something more as well: it establishes a new reality. Bread and wine, for example, when blessed at the eucharistic table, are set apart from their ordinary use and designated for a particular, sacred purpose. Similarly, the public affirmation of divine blessing in a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart from other types. God’s people expect such a blessing to bear the fruits of God’s grace in particular ways, making a couple in such a blessed covenant accountable to the community of faith, as well as to God and to each other. The community, in turn, is held accountable for encouraging, supporting, and nurturing a blessed relationship as the couple seeks to grow together in holiness of life.

In short, the grace and blessing of God already discerned in a couple’s relationship does not thereby render a liturgical rite of blessing redundant. To the contrary, the Church’s blessing performs what it declares, thus

<sup>15</sup> “The General Thanksgiving,” BCP, 125.

changing the couple and the Church. The couple becomes more fully aware of God's favor and also receives a particular role, as a couple, in the Church's mission in the world; the Church is likewise changed, as holiness of life is made more visible and as it receives and accepts its commission to support the couple in their life and ministry.

Scripture guides us in this understanding of blessing by placing it in relation to both creation and covenant. In Genesis, God declares the whole creation good, a source of blessing for which we thank God, the giver of every good gift. This blessing is manifested in more particular ways in the covenant God makes with Noah and, by extension, the whole of the creation (Genesis 9:8–16), with Abraham (Genesis 12:2–3), and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 7:12–14). Likewise, the New Testament reflects God's blessing on all creation, as the Word of God becomes flesh in Jesus; it reflects the blessing of covenant as well, as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reconcile us with God and assure us of God's loving faithfulness toward us and the whole creation. In his final meal with his disciples, Jesus blessed God for the bread and cup as signs of the new covenant (Matthew 26:26–29). The blessing we receive by participating in that meal at the eucharistic table strengthens us to live out in all of our relationships the forgiveness and reconciliation to which that meal calls us.

Scripture bears witness to the relational character of blessing: being in relationship with God is not only a blessing for us, but becomes a blessing to others as well. God's covenant with Israel becomes a blessing not for Israel alone but for "all the nations." This is the very promise made to Abraham: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3b). The extent of this divine blessing unfolded in Israel's self-awareness over time and in various ways. "All the nations" referred, of course, to Gentiles, the very ones many in Israel had not expected to share in God's promises. God's blessing thus expands the reach of welcome and hospitality not only to the near and familiar neighbor, but also to the distant stranger, who is made neighbor because of God's own generosity. As Paul noted, through faith "in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14). The blessing of God's covenant with us in Christ empowers us, through the Spirit, to offer such expansive and generous blessing to the world, in thought, word, and deed. God's blessings inspire us in countless ways to live as emissaries of divine blessing in all that we do — in our work, our play, and our relationships. In all of this, God's goodness in our lives becomes a blessing to others, to neighbors both near and far.

As Christians, baptism and eucharist focus our attention on the particular blessings of the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Those blessings, in turn, encourage us to discern the many other ways God's blessing is manifested in both creation and covenant. The goodness of God makes everything in creation a potential vehicle for blessing, including the love and faithfulness of covenantal relationship, in which we experience our call to manifest divine goodness. Thus, the Church is continually discerning where the goodness of God, the grace of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are urging the Church to manifest God's blessing for others and, in response, to bless God with hearts and lives marked by gratitude and praise.

Another aspect of the biblical witness deserves attention as well: the emphasis on *abundance*. In the midst of desert wanderings, Moses struck a rock and "water came out abundantly" for the people of Israel (Numbers 20:11). "Like the vine," we read in Ecclesiasticus, "I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit" (Ecclesiasticus 24:17). "You prepare a table before me," declares the psalmist, and "my cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5). "Give," Jesus says, "and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap" (Luke 6:38). And to the Christians in Corinth, Paul declares, "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Scripture invites us, in other words, to see the blessing of God's goodness, not as a scarce commodity either to hoard or to protect, but rather as an unending font of deathless love and perpetual grace — a veritable embarrassment of divine riches. In sacred covenantal relationship, God's abundance is exhibited in many ways, including the companionship, friendship, and mutual joy of intimacy. By affirming and publicly acknowledging that blessing of abundance already present in vibrant covenantal relationships, including same-sex relationships,

the Church expects those relationships to manifest the grace of God, the gifts of the Spirit, and holiness of life.

Jesus' iconic parable about the prodigal son adds a further layer to this biblical witness to God's abundant love and grace. In this story, God pours out the abundance of divine blessing on all, regardless of merit or circumstance. When the prodigal son decides at last to return to his father's house, hoping to be granted, at best, the status of a slave, his father rushes to meet him and welcome him home, and even prepares a lavish feast in his honor. "While he was still far off," Jesus says, and thus well before the son could speak any words of repentance, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). In our lives, as in the parable, God showers us with blessings so that we may receive life abundantly, even though we have in no way earned these blessings.

This parable suggests that the abundance of this household is more than sufficient to open outward to receive the younger son. The abundance of this household is even more than sufficient for the resentful elder son, who begrudges such celebration for his wayward brother. The household brims with abundance, if only the elder son would open his heart to receive it (Luke 15:29–31). Both sons in Jesus' parable stand as potent reminders that the blessing of divine goodness does not automatically transform lives: we must be willing to receive such blessing. And yet even when we are not willing, God will continue to offer blessings in abundance. The teachings of Jesus return to this theme repeatedly, as in the parables of the sower (Mark 4:3–8) and the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1–10), as well as the feeding of more than five thousand with just five loaves of bread and two fish (Luke 9:12–17).

The Church's participation in divine blessing can help each of us in various ways to be open to God's abundant goodness. The Church's liturgical life, that is, our practice of common prayer and worship, can create space for God's people to open their hearts and minds to receiving the blessing God offers. For those in a covenantal relationship, that intentional space (for both hearing the word of blessing in their lives and blessing God in return) marks a significant, even an essential deepening and strengthening of their lives with each other, with their community, and with God. In blessing covenantal relationships, just as in the eucharist, we give thanks for God's abundant goodness and pray for the continued presence of the Spirit to empower us to do the work God has given us to do in the world. The blessing of the eucharistic table sets us apart as the Body of Christ in the world, called and empowered to proclaim the gospel, just as the blessing of a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart as "a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair."<sup>16</sup>

Discerning, pronouncing, seeking, and returning blessing describe well the Church's work. Even more, it is the Church's joy. Paul urged the Christians in Rome to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). The early Christians gave themselves to such rejoicing, as they were "continually in the temple blessing God" in their celebration of Christ's victory over death (Luke 24:53). Whenever and wherever the Church discerns particular instances of God's abundant goodness, the Church rightly thanks God for such a gift. We also ask God for the grace to live into that gift more fully, as we joyfully bear witness to that blessing in the world.

<sup>16</sup> The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, BCP, 429.

### 3. The Church's Life: Covenantal Relationship

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Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

— Romans 6:3–4

#### Creation, Baptism, and Eucharist

Covenants have taken many different forms across time and in diverse cultural contexts. Both Scripture and Christian history exhibit that diversity as well. The most familiar covenantal relationship is marriage, to which both the Hebrew prophets and New Testament writers turned as a way to describe God's desire and commitment to be in relationship with us (Isaiah 62:5, Ephesians 5:21–33). Marriage itself has exhibited a variety of forms over the centuries yet still provides a pattern for a number of significant covenantal relationships, such as the vowed religious life or ordained ministry.

In 2000, General Convention identified certain characteristics that the Church expects to see in lifelong, committed relationships: “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God” (Resolution D039). These characteristics describe well what we mean by “covenant” as we have reflected theologically on same-sex relationships. A couple enacts their decision to enter into a lifelong commitment of fidelity and accountability in the context of God's household, the Church, by exchanging vows, and the Church responds by pronouncing God's blessing. Covenantal relationship then carries the potential to reflect for the Church the gracious covenant God has made with us in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, which the Church celebrates in baptism and eucharist.

Some will find this kind of theological reflection on same-sex relationships unfamiliar and perhaps unwarranted. Many different-sex couples would likewise find this to be a new way of thinking about their own marital vows. Thus, General Convention Resolution 2009-Co56, which called for these theological resources, becomes an opportunity for reflecting more broadly on the role of covenantal relationship in the life of the Church. In doing so, the blessing of same-sex relationships can then be understood within the broader framework of the Church's sacramental life and its mission in the world.

The framework for covenantal relationship begins with God's own declaration of the goodness of creation (Genesis 1:31). That goodness inspires us to give thanks to God, the creator of all things. The heavens declare God's glory, the psalmist reminds us, and the earth proclaims God's handiwork (Psalm 19:1). Thus, even in creation's fragility, limitation, and affliction, the biblical writers discerned signs of God's providential power, sustaining love, and saving grace. The Church celebrates God's goodness in worship and with sacramental signs of God's blessing. These “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace” manifest God's transforming presence and so are “sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”<sup>17</sup> Chief among these signs are baptism and eucharist, which derive directly from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and unction also manifest the grace of God at key moments in Christian life, each in its own way, yet these are by no means the only occasions that do so.<sup>18</sup> As disciples of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, we are called to make God's creating, redeeming, and sustaining love known in all things, in all circumstances, and throughout our daily lives and relationships. The sacramental life of the Church focuses that calling in particular ways.

<sup>17</sup> “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 857.

<sup>18</sup> “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 857–58, 861.

Baptism and eucharist recapitulate the arc of salvation history in creation, sin, judgment, repentance, and redemption, or the fulfillment of the whole creation in the presence of God.<sup>19</sup> In baptism, we are incorporated into the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live more fully into the holiness of life to which God calls all of us. This sacramental act manifests the eternal covenant God has made with us, declaring that we are God's own beloved, inheritors of God's promises, and God's friends;<sup>20</sup> we are sealed by God's own Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.<sup>21</sup> This sign of God's covenant is irrevocable, not relying on our adherence to the covenant but rather on the grace and goodness of God in Christ Jesus. As members of the Body of Christ, we commit ourselves to live in the manner of life appropriate to the body to which we belong. This manner of life is summed up in the two great commandments: to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>22</sup> Even though we inevitably fall far short of this commitment, God's steadfast love maintains the covenant God has made, and God both seeks and graciously enables our return to fidelity.

In The Episcopal Church, the significance of baptism for Christian faith and life became even clearer with the ratification of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The Baptismal Covenant shapes the rite of Holy Baptism by beginning with an affirmation of faith (the Apostles' Creed), followed by five distinct promises made by (or on behalf of) those being baptized: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship; to persevere in resisting evil; to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; and to strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of all persons.<sup>23</sup> The rite begins, in other words, with God's own Trinitarian mission of creating, redeeming, and sustaining love in the world. The promises we make are in response to that divine mission and constitute our vowed commitment to participate in that mission — and always “with God's help.” This approach to baptismal theology continues to guide and inform our prayerful discernment as Episcopalians, which is rooted first and foremost in the covenant God makes with us through the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14).<sup>24</sup>

In the redemptive work of the Incarnation, God draws the whole creation back into union with God, lifting it up through the resurrection and ascension of Christ toward its perfection, when God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). In the eucharist we celebrate this transformative action, accomplished through Christ's self-giving of his own Body and Blood, which nourishes our bodies and souls, equipping us to participate in God's own mission of reconciliation in the world.

In the eucharist, our fragmented lives are gathered together into one offering to God, the giver of all good things. As a community gathered in prayer, we reaffirm our participation in God's covenant as we hear God's holy word, confess and receive forgiveness of our sins, and join with the whole company of saints in prayer for the Church and the world. God receives the gifts we bring, limited and flawed as they may be, blesses them, and then returns them to us as bread from heaven. As we are nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, we are formed ever deeper in holiness of life, conforming to the likeness of Christ. At the table, we are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in which all are gathered to God — a foretaste that clarifies and strengthens our longing to witness to God's love. As we are blessed and sent out, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God's work of bringing all things to that sanctification and fullness for which God created them. Moreover, as we celebrate eucharist together, we recall all the other tables that we gather around in our various households and come to see them as places where Christ is present. This eucharistic pattern — often described with the actions *take*, *bless*, *break*, and *give* — shapes all the relationships that we bring into our baptismal life with God. We *take* these relationships, *bless* God for their goodness, ask God to

<sup>19</sup> See “Thanksgiving over the Water,” BCP, 306–307; Romans 8:18–25; and 1 Corinthians 15:28.

<sup>20</sup> “I do not call you servants any longer, ... but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). See also Gregory of Nyssa, who understood our incorporation into the Body of Christ to make us God's own “friends” (*Orat. in 1 Cor. xv.28*).

<sup>21</sup> Holy Baptism, BCP, 308.

<sup>22</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, and Matthew 22:37–40.

<sup>23</sup> BCP, 304–305.

<sup>24</sup> See Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, The New Church's Teaching Series, vol. 12 (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2002), 11–22.

bless them and *break* them open further to divine grace, so that we may *give* them to the world as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Baptism and eucharist, as sacraments of God’s covenant of creating, redeeming, and sustaining love, shape our lives as Christians in relation to God and to God’s creation; this calls us to live with love, compassion, justice, and peace toward all creatures, friend or foe, neighbor or stranger. We are not only called to live in this way but also strengthened to do so by our participation in these sacramental acts. The sacramental life of the Church strengthens us to give ourselves and to receive others as we contribute to the coming of God’s realm “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10) and proclaim Christ until he comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Through baptism and eucharist we are brought into and sustained in all these many and various relationships. First and foremost among them is our relationship with the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. We also participate in countless other relationships with the many diverse people, communities, and institutions that we encounter throughout the world. All of these relationships call us to bear witness to the gospel precisely because our lives as creatures of God are constituted in relation; we are created in the Trinitarian image of God, an image that is inherently relational and rooted and grounded in love.<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, same-sex relationships belong in that extensive network of relations in which we are called to bear witness to the gospel. In the next section, we consider the blessing of same-sex relationships in that broader context, beginning with the fundamental call all of us share to love our neighbors as ourselves. Since God calls us into particular forms of loving commitments with others, we turn in the following sections to three interrelated aspects of that calling: covenant-making, intentional Christian households, and faithful intimacy.

### Loving Our Neighbors as Ourselves

Christians strive to model all of our relationships on the love, grace, and compassion of Christ, loving our neighbors, both near and distant, as we love ourselves. Loving others is possible only because of the grace of God, who first loved us (1 John 4:19). Baptism and eucharist continually send us out to all our neighbors, where we learn again and again the blessing of offering ourselves and receiving others in gospel hospitality.

Hospitality means more than good manners. Scripture regards hospitality toward both friend and stranger as evidence of covenantal obedience and fruitfulness.<sup>26</sup> The story of Sodom’s destruction in Genesis 19, a particularly dramatic biblical reminder of the importance of hospitable relations, has been frequently cited by opponents of blessing same-sex relationships. However, such interpretations of this passage rely less on the biblical story itself than on the cultural reception of this story over many centuries of European history.<sup>27</sup>

The narrative in this passage turns on whether certain visitors to Sodom will be received graciously and hospitably by the city’s inhabitants or instead will be exploited and even raped. The sin of Sodom’s citizens thus refers explicitly to the codes of hospitality in the ancient Near East rather than to same-sex sexual relations.<sup>28</sup> Other biblical writers who refer to Sodom never highlight sexuality — or mention it at all.

<sup>25</sup> “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 845.

<sup>26</sup> See Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 24:19–21, Malachi 3:5, and Hebrews 13:2, among many others. For an overview and analysis of the centrality of hospitality in Scripture and in early Christianity, see Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> The term “sodomy,” for example, does not appear in Scripture, and what it has come to mean (including within North Atlantic jurisprudence) is not supported by the biblical references to it. See Jay Emerson Johnson, “Sodomy and Gendered Love: Reading Genesis 19 in the Anglican Communion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 413–34; and Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> The definition of “sodomy” varied widely throughout Christian history and coalesced exclusively around a particular sexual act between men only in the eleventh century; see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Ezekiel’s interpretation, for example, is quite direct: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).<sup>29</sup> Jesus evokes the story of Sodom not to teach about sexual ethics but in the context of sending out his disciples to minister. Those who do not receive his disciples, he promises, will suffer a fate worse than the citizens of Sodom (Matthew 10:15). The threat underscores the centrality of hospitality in that ancient story.<sup>30</sup>

As early as the 1950s, biblical scholars attempted to place Genesis 19 in its original cultural context and to revive an interpretive approach to that story that resonated with the intrabiblical witness to it.<sup>31</sup> In this interpretation, Genesis 19 applies to all people rather than only to some, and the lesson for all is the primacy of hospitality, or the love of neighbor, as Jesus himself commanded.<sup>32</sup> We manifest this love of neighbor in countless ways, each instance shaped by the particular individual or community we encounter, whether in our own family, with coworkers, or with strangers.

Relationships, in other words, take many different forms. At times, we choose particular relationships based on our own preferences, needs, or desires; at other times, we are in relationships without a lot of choice, as with colleagues at work or fellow travelers. No matter which, the “neighbor” offers us an occasion for manifesting the love of God in Christ. The gospels proclaim not only the self-giving love Jesus showed to the disciples he chose, but also the love Jesus urged for the stranger encountered by chance, as in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Christ sets the example for us to follow in all of our many and varied relationships, a model that respects the dignity of every person and that encourages giving oneself for the good of the other.<sup>33</sup> Relationships are “schools for virtue” and formation – that is, opportunities for us to form dispositions and habits that manifest Christ-like love.

As people joined with God and to each other by baptism and eucharist, we are called to embody in all of our relationships — those we may consider personal or private *and* those we consider corporate or public — a love that is both self-giving and other-receiving. As we endeavor to respond to this calling, we depend on God’s grace as we are gradually brought by the Spirit into that union with God for which Christ himself prayed (John 17:11). We also serve as living proclamations of God’s creative, redeeming, and sustaining love for the world. Given our limitations, that witness is inevitably imperfect and sometimes ambiguous, yet we continue to trust that all things are working together for good (Romans 8:28) as we shape our lives and relationships to the pattern of God’s own love for us and for the world. That pattern may then lead into particular forms of commitment in which we discern a call to covenantal relationship.

<sup>29</sup> Ezekiel’s description represents the approach most often taken by writers in the Hebrew Bible, in which the sin of Sodom is always associated with violence or injustice; see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). In the New Testament, Jude 7 is sometimes cited as well, yet that verse does not describe “sexual immorality” precisely (it could refer to rape, for example); the “unnatural lust” of Sodom’s inhabitants could also mean that the strangers sent to Sodom were actually angels (see Genesis 6:4).

<sup>30</sup> Patristic writers viewed hospitality as central. See, for example, Origen, *Homilia V in Genesim* (PG 12:188–89): “Hear this, you who close your homes to guests! Hear this, you who shun the traveler as an enemy! Lot lived among the Sodomites. We do not read of any other good deeds of his ... [save] he opened his home to guests”; Ambrose of Milan, *De Abrahamo* 1:6:52 (PL 14:440): Lot “placed the hospitality of his house — sacred even among a barbarous people — above the modesty [of his daughters].” Cited by John Boswell, *Christianity, Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 98.

<sup>31</sup> One of the earliest examples of this approach was Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955).

<sup>32</sup> Some biblical scholars continue to interpret the story as a condemnation of homosexual behavior. See, for example, Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 71–91.

<sup>33</sup> “The Baptismal Covenant,” BCP, 305.



## Called into Covenant

Some loving relationships with our neighbors exhibit a particular depth of commitment, which can lead to an intentional covenant with another person or with a community. Scripture bears witness to the significance of covenant-making in many ways but especially as an expression of God’s blessing, such as the covenant God makes with the whole of creation through Noah (Genesis 9:9–13) and with the people of Israel through Abraham (Genesis 12:2–3). Christians celebrate the covenant that Jesus proclaimed and enacted at the final meal he shared with his disciples (Luke 22:20) and which we mark with the “cup of blessing” (1 Corinthians 10:16) at the eucharistic table.

Scripture invites us, in other words, to see our covenantal commitments with each other as particular expressions of the love of both God and neighbor as well as expressions of God’s blessing. As we commit ourselves to the good of the other, we offer that commitment as a witness to God’s covenantal love for the world. We discover God’s blessing in these covenantal commitments as we are able, more and more, to manifest consistent regard and respect for the other, even as we struggle with our own limitations and flaws. We discover God’s blessing even further as we realize, in ever newer ways, how a covenantal relationship can enhance and contribute to the well-being of others, of neighbors, strangers, the Church, and the world.

People who enter a covenant promise each other, a community, and God that their shared future will take a particular shape, one for which they intend to be held accountable, not only by their covenant partners but also by the wider community.<sup>34</sup> While the Canons of the Episcopal Church describe marriage as a union of a man and a woman, the patterns of marriage can help us understand other kinds of covenantal relationship, such as vowed religious life and the commitments of same-sex couples. In all of these covenantal relationships, the partners promise to be trustworthy, to remain faithful to one another despite other demands on their time and energy or possibilities for engagement with others. The partners promise to accompany and assist each other in faithfulness; they pledge their support for the well-being of the other. These relationships are directed toward vitality and fruitfulness as they contribute to human flourishing, within and beyond the relationship. The depth of this covenantal commitment means it is a *vocation*, a life of faithfulness to which some are called by God and which God blesses, so that, by God’s grace, that blessing will be made manifest to the world.

Recognizing God’s blessing and the work of the Spirit in relationships of lifelong commitment, the Church rightly celebrates these moments of covenantal vocation. This divine calling, discerned by a couple and their faith community, draws the Church deeper into God’s own mission of redeeming and sanctifying love in the world. Christians express this calling in the ways we live our lives with others. Two of these ways deserve attention here: shaping households and deepening faithful intimacy.

## The Vocation of Households

Households today are most often associated with marriage and child-rearing, yet this has not always been the case. The history of the Church offers a broader view of how households can bear witness to the gospel. Since it is finally God, and not another human being or anything else in creation, that fulfills and completes us, some people feel called to remain unmarried or single. A single life, which is not necessarily the same as a solitary life, can be lived in households of various types. Living in this way can allow individuals to be more available as friends and companions; this is often the case with vowed religious life, such as a monastic calling. Indeed, for the first half of its history (more than a thousand years), the Church understood vowed religious life as a calling higher than marriage, a view that changed decisively only during the Protestant Reformation. The diverse forms of an intentional single life may afford greater opportunity for contemplation, service, and mission, which some people understand as a particular vocational calling into

<sup>34</sup> See Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

deeper relationship with God and the world. This seems to be Paul’s understanding of the spiritual significance of remaining unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:25–32).

Paul also discusses human sexuality in relation to God’s gracious covenant with us in Christ in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. This chapter, especially verses 26–27, has been used to support the Church’s reluctance to embrace the loving faithfulness of same-sex couples and continues to influence conversation in Christian communities.

In interpreting this Pauline passage, it is difficult to know precisely what Paul meant by “unnatural” in those verses and to whom he was addressing these concerns.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, Paul’s description of sexual behavior in the first chapter appears in direct relation to his condemnation of idolatry. For Paul, the consequence — not the cause — of worshiping false gods is a distorted understanding of sexuality, its purpose and goal (Romans 1:22–23). In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, those distortions of sexuality with which Paul was most likely familiar included a range of practices associated with cults devoted to fertility gods and goddesses. Some interpreters have claimed that these cultic rituals may have included self-castration, drunken orgies, and sex with young male and female temple prostitutes.<sup>36</sup> Christians rightly condemn all those behaviors as violations of the human body, the very temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul insisted (1 Corinthians 3:16–17). Moreover, some interpreters say, those alleged ancient cultic practices have nothing to do with today’s same-sex Christian couples.<sup>37</sup>

Paul’s broader insight, however, still compels the Church to continual discernment and assessment of its common life: proper worship corresponds directly to proper sexual relations. This insight can shed even further light on Paul’s recommendation to the Christians in Corinth that they remain unmarried.

In the end, human sexual relationships of any kind are not the purpose or goal of human life. Instead, union with God in Christ is the goal for all, including the whole created order, as the rest of Paul’s letter to the Romans makes clear (Romans 8:18–25). At their best, human relationships can only point us toward that final fulfillment. People who make an intentional decision to remain unmarried place important signposts on that spiritual journey to which all of us are called and in which nothing, including marriage, should supplant our primary devotion to God and to God’s household, the Church.

Other types of relationships teach us that to prepare us for life with God, God can bind us with another for life. Thus, some (though not all) covenantal commitments are enacted in households, those intimate spaces where people encounter each other as their nearest neighbors daily and continually.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the character, shape, and form of a household have varied enormously over time, from the patriarchal and polygamous families of ancient Israel to the family Jesus created between his mother and his beloved disciple (John 19:26–27) and the economic reordering of familial relations among early believers (Acts 4:32–37, 5:1–7). What “household” means and how people may be called, as a vocation, into covenantal households matter not only in light of historical differences but also in the midst of the wide range of household customs and organizational patterns found throughout the world today.

Appreciating the significant cultural differences between the households of ancient Israel and today’s Western, nuclear families can also inform our interpretation of two biblical passages cited as a scriptural

<sup>35</sup> See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 119–123. See also Dale B. Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,” in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 51–64. Some interpreters have noted that Paul uses the phrase often translated as “contrary to nature” in Romans 1 again in Romans 11:24 to describe the love of God in saving those same Gentiles; see William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 98–99.

<sup>36</sup> For the controversy over ancient fertility cults and the alleged sexual practices associated with them, see Robert A. Oden, Jr., *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), especially chapter 5, “Religious Identity and the Sacred Prostitution Accusation,” 131–153.

<sup>37</sup> See Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 103–113.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas E. Breidenthal, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

warrant for rejecting the loving faithfulness of same-sex couples: Leviticus 18:22 and its analogue, 20:13. These two verses belong to an extensive array of dietary restrictions, commandments, and ritual practices often referred to as the “Levitical holiness code.” Two features of ancient Israelite society are important in interpreting these difficult passages: the process of constructing a religious identity for Israel distinct from its surrounding cultures, and the strict gender hierarchy of the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>39</sup>

Leviticus 18:22 condemns sex between men, and, more particularly, treating a man like a woman. The Hebrew word used for this condemnation, translated as “abomination,” appears most often with reference to the cultic practices associated with the worship of foreign gods; similar condemnations of child sacrifice and bestiality in Leviticus 18 strengthen the connection to idolatrous rituals.<sup>40</sup> Equally important, patriarchy placed a high premium on male privilege. Sexual practices reflected this gendered ordering as men were expected to take an active role and women a passive one, reflecting and perpetuating male dominance in all other spheres of cultural and religious life and reinforcing the treatment of women as property. Sexual relations in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context were defined by who had power over whom. So, according to this worldview, sex between men would violate male privilege and disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society.<sup>41</sup>

Ancient Israelite culture, which the Levitical holiness code was meant to uphold, differs significantly from the egalitarian ideals toward which many Christian families strive in modern Western culture (and indeed in other locales as well).<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the distinctive concerns shared by both the ancient Israelites and Paul to reject the sexual practices associated with idolatrous cults are in no way applicable to the lives of faithful Christians today who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. These historical and cultural differences, however, do not render these biblical passages irrelevant: Scripture continues to bear witness to the primacy of covenantal relationship with the one true God of Israel, whom Christians believe and proclaim is revealed decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Scripture would have us make that divine covenant primary in the ordering of our household relations in culturally appropriate ways.

In households formed by married different-sex couples and covenanted same-sex couples alike, the process of conforming to the likeness of Christ and striving toward holiness of life unfolds in deeply shared accountability. The couple continually attempts to place their desires within the vows and commitments they have made to each other. Living together in a household may provide the stability which makes possible the vulnerability necessary to self-giving and other-receiving.<sup>43</sup> In a household, the members of the couple become one another’s nearest neighbor so that they may grow together in the love of God. The household shelters the daily practice, which Jesus urged, of finding one’s life by giving it to another.

For same-sex couples as for married different-sex couples, households provide the structure for the daily life of covenanted closeness: laboring to provide for one another and to support family, organizing a household

<sup>39</sup> Insights from Jewish commentators and scholars on these and other important aspects of biblical interpretation deserve renewed attention in Christian communities. See, for example, Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> See Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 37–56. Paul would likely have known the connection between the Levitical holiness code and idolatrous cults as well, which lends further support to interpreting the first chapter of Romans with reference to temple prostitution.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, revised edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 68–69.

<sup>42</sup> The treatment not only of women but also of children as property, as well as the practice of keeping concubines and slaves in ancient Mediterranean households, mark these differences even further. See Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 251–59; Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 29–58; and Amy L. Wordelman, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 482–88.

<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1996), 58–68.

and its daily table, maintaining and sharing property, caring for another in sickness and at death.<sup>44</sup> Households may be schools for virtue and for penance and reconciliation, as well as habitations of mutual support and joy, places for glimpsing and also deepening our experience of the presence of God. People living alone, who are single, bereaved, or divorced, are also called to live out their baptismal vocation by the love, service, hospitality, and accountability of their relationships within the Church and in the communities of which they are a part, as well as through their service of prayer to others.

A household formed by a couple in a covenantal relationship can remind all of us of our incorporation into the paschal mystery through baptism, in which we are received into the household of God and encouraged to “confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share ... in his eternal priesthood.”<sup>45</sup> In their household, a couple faces the many ways in which their faith forms their daily lives. They offer themselves daily to each other in order to become part of the other’s life, dying to sin and rising to a new life directed toward love of neighbor and love of God. In this giving of self and receiving of another, we see the gracious pattern of God’s own triune life into which we are, more and more, caught up and transformed for mission.

In households we also see an image of the eucharist. The household tables around which couples in covenantal relationship gather evoke the eucharistic table around which we gather as the community of believers. In the household, as at the eucharist, couples take what is given to them and offer it to God. They are nourished and blessed by what they receive, and the Spirit then empowers them to be a blessing to others and to God. In a household, as at the eucharistic table, what God has joined together may become one body, and the Spirit may distribute a household’s gifts to many. In households, same-sex as well as different-sex couples in covenantal relationships strive to imitate Jesus, who gave himself bodily for those he loved.

To give one’s self over to love, care, and commitment in solidarity with another person, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, is daily and bodily to partake in the reconciling work of God in Christ. In the lives of intimate couples, sexual desire for one another can be forged into covenantal witness to the gospel.

### Faithful Intimacy

The movement from sexual desire into faithful intimacy and covenantal commitment marks a particular kind of vocational path, which for Christians shapes the passion of *eros* into the affection of *agape* for the good of the Church and the world. Theological reflection on this path begins by affirming the goodness of sexual desire itself. Indeed, sexual desire is a metaphor for God’s desire to be in relationship with us and the whole creation. Scripture and Christian tradition draw on sexually intimate relationships to point to the God who is Love and who stands in relationships of love with all creation. The long tradition of commentary on the biblical Song of Songs, for example, illustrates the spiritual significance of sexual relationships and the fruitfulness of reflecting theologically on the commitment of sexually intimate couples.<sup>46</sup> In such reflection, we can realize and appreciate that “the whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us.” The good news of God’s desire for us can then shape our intimate commitments and the life of the wider Christian community so that all of us may see ourselves as desired, as “the occasion of joy.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, Cynthia B. Kittredge, and Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “A Theology of Marriage including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 (Winter 2011): 63–64.

<sup>45</sup> Holy Baptism, BCP, 308.

<sup>46</sup> David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Douglas Burton-Christie, “Into the Body of Another: Eros, Embodiment and Intimacy with the Natural World,” *Anglican Theological Review* 81:1 (Winter 1999): 13–37.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, 59.

The gift of human sexuality, established by God in creation, can be a source of sustaining joy, reminding us bodily of the abundance God intends for the whole creation. In the mutual self-offering of one to another in a sexual relationship of fidelity, we can catch a glimpse of the delight God exhibits for each of us. Yet sexual desire is also fraught with risk because it draws us into relationships of vulnerability, where not only the brightest and best dimensions of ourselves are offered to another but also where the painful aspects are exposed, the ones that we often prefer to keep hidden and that need healing. Sexual desire and intimacy make us vulnerable so that God can turn our limits to our good, showing us that we are not our own but belong to someone else.

Faithful relationships of sexual intimacy can also be an occasion to bear witness to God's love as they form the couples more fully in the image of Christ. In marriage, the Church blesses and celebrates these relationships as potential vehicles for God's grace. Many in The Episcopal Church today have come to believe that this is as true for same-sex couples as it is for different-sex couples.<sup>48</sup> Others, however, understand the doctrine of creation differently and believe that God's gift of human sexuality is intended only for different-sex couples. Even the language of "same-sex" and "different-sex" raises many complex questions, not only biologically, socially, and culturally, but also and especially biblically.

Genesis 1 and 2, for example, are often cited to support two interrelated convictions: first, that "gender complementarity" describes God's creation of human beings as male and female; and second, that such complementarity is best expressed in the procreation of children within monogamous marriage. The extensive biblical scholarship available on these passages — in both Jewish and Christian traditions — nuances those two convictions in some important ways.

In the first of the two creation accounts (Genesis 1:26–27), gender differentiation is attributed to the whole human species rather than to individuals, just as both male and female alike apply to God, in whose image humanity is made.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) is given to the human species, not to each individual. If this were not the case, people "who are single, celibate, or who for whatever reason do not have children — including Jesus of Nazareth" — would be viewed as "disobedient sinners."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the generative aspects of a loving and faithful commitment can be seen in many different ways, not only in bearing and raising children. For same-sex couples, as one Episcopal bishop has pointed out, "the care and nurture of those already in the world may be a mission more excellently fulfilled by those who do not have the concerns of child-rearing."<sup>51</sup>

The second account in Genesis refers specifically to the creation of distinct individuals (Genesis 2:7–22), and introduces something that is *not* good in God's creation: "It is not good," God declares, "for the human being to be alone."<sup>52</sup> Here the story turns on the importance of companionship and not, as in the first account, on the procreation of children. Significantly, the companion God provides for the solitary human is not defined by "otherness" but by suitable similarity. In this passage, "there is no emphasis ... on 'difference' or 'complementarity' at all — in fact, just the opposite. When Adam sees Eve, he does not celebrate her otherness but her sameness: what strikes him is that she is 'bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.'" Reducing this story to the fitness of particular anatomical parts misses the poignancy of this story: "God sees the plight of this first human being and steps in and does whatever it takes to provide him with a

<sup>48</sup> *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, 8–9, 24–25.

<sup>49</sup> Some ancient Talmudic commentaries suggest, for example, that the original human shared with God all of the possible gender characteristics, which were later divided between "male" and "female." This text, in other words, raises a host of questions which the text itself does not address concerning gender and sexuality in both humanity and God. See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed., *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 115–16.

<sup>51</sup> Marshall, *Same-Sex Unions*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Genesis 2:18 (for the significance of this translation of the verse, see Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 114–115, 117).

life-giving, life-sustaining companion.”<sup>53</sup> Rather than focusing on marriage, these creation accounts affirm God as the creator of all things and “the priority of human companionship.”<sup>54</sup>

Genesis 1 and 2 can and should continue to shape, inform, and energize the Church’s faithful witness to the God revealed in Scripture. These passages can do so as the Church proclaims God as the creator and affirms the goodness of God’s creation, which includes the dignity of every human being as created in God’s image. This affirmation remains vital, not least for the sake of embracing the full humanity of women. The unqualified dignity with which the biblical writer treated both men and women in the account of their creation stands out as quite remarkable in the patriarchal culture in which it was written.<sup>55</sup>

Paul, furthermore, would urge Christians to read the Genesis accounts of creation through the lens of the new creation, which God has promised in Christ, the first fruits of which God has provided by raising Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20–25). Living into that promise and anticipating its fulfillment, Paul urged the Christians in Galatia to understand their baptism as erasing familiar social and cultural hierarchies: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27–28).<sup>56</sup> Rather than emphasizing the significance of gender, the faithfulness of sexually intimate couples can contribute to the Church’s witness to the new life God offers in Christ and through the Spirit, which the Church celebrates in the “sacraments of the new creation.”<sup>57</sup> For both same-sex and different-sex couples, then, the theological and moral significance of their covenantal commitment is rooted in the paschal mystery.

As in baptism and eucharist, the covenantal commitments of sexually intimate couples sweep their bodies up into a grand and risky endeavor: to see if they can find their life in God by giving it to another. In these covenants, two people vow to give themselves bodily and wholeheartedly to each other. They do this, in part, to live out the promises of baptism while also living into the self-offering of Christ, as expressed at the eucharistic table: “This is my body, given for you.” The lifelong commitment of covenanted couples can, by God’s grace, testify to the love of God by signifying Christ and the Church. These commitments can thus evoke for the wider community the very promise of the paschal mystery enacted in baptism and eucharist: we are being drawn deeper into God’s own life where we learn that God’s love is stronger than death.

Sexually intimate couples can also testify to the love of neighbor by loving each other, a love that requires both time and the sustenance of God’s grace. Covenantal couples can model this love, not as a static tableau but as an ongoing school for virtue in which the practices of neighbor-love are developed, reformed, and brought toward perfection. The moral significance of a covenantal relationship is its potential to bring each of the covenant partners up against their embodied limits as finite creatures and to become willing to be vulnerable to another. A covenantal commitment challenges and inspires each partner to self-offering as

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 114.

<sup>55</sup> William Stacy Johnson notes, for example, that in ancient Mediterranean society, women were considered human beings but decidedly deficient ones and were therefore rightly subservient to men (*A Time to Embrace*, 275, n.16). Dale B. Martin likewise relates this ancient view of the inferiority of women — as “deficient men” — to the difficulties in translating, let alone interpreting, two Greek words in the New Testament that have been frequently cited regarding homosexuality. Those words appear in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The words “sodomite” or “homosexual” have appeared in some English translations of those verses, but the meaning of the Greek in both cases is obscure and elusive. Martin believes it likely that these words referred to cultural practices involving sexual exploitation (perhaps including rape) and also effeminate behavior, which for men in that society triggered both alarm and disgust (“Arsenokoitês and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996], 117–36).

<sup>56</sup> See Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 77–90.

<sup>57</sup> Among the many sources for this connection between the sacramental life of the Church and the divine promise of the new creation, see Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Continuum, 2010), where he refers to the Church’s sacraments as “mysteries of human unity” insofar as we are, through the sacraments, being incorporated into the new creation God is bringing about (xii).

each lives out with the other the relation of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21–33). Members of a couple urge each other forward in growth, which occurs through and with the creaturely limitations that Christ took on for our good: the limits of time and the body. Our desires, including our sexual desires, “can be an especially intense and unsettling reminder of our radical availability to the other. Like parental affection or simple compassion, sexual desire can cause our heart to ‘belong’ to another. ... This desire shatters any illusions we may have regarding our ability to choose when and if we shall be connected to others; indeed, it is itself a warrant for the claim that our fundamental relation to one another is one of connection.”<sup>58</sup>

Giving ourselves to another, as Christ gave himself for the world, takes time and the willingness to risk the vulnerability inherent to the commitment of love. The movement of sexual desire toward intimacy and into commitment begins as we give ourselves over to another in faithful relation and continues toward the final moment of committal, surrendering our lives to God. This movement describes a lifelong, deliberate process that, with obedience and faithfulness, produces visible holiness and the fruits of the Spirit. Both for the good of the couple and for the good of the Church, God blesses this loving, intimate commitment. This blessing, in turn, empowers the couple for their ministry in the world and energizes the Church for mission.

### Mutual Blessing and Fruitfulness

As Christians, all of our relationships — as single people, in households, as intimate couples — are occasions to live more fully into our Baptismal Covenant and to participate more deeply in the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection enacted at the eucharistic table. The commitment we exhibit in our relationships — to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and as God loves each of us in Christ — thus becomes a source of blessing for the whole Church.

This broad framework of covenantal relationship for the Church’s life offers a way to reflect on the significance of the many types of covenants with which the Church is blessed — in ordination, monastic vows, marriage, and also in same-sex relationships. The blessing of any relationship is a blessing not only for those in a relationship but also and equally for the wider community in which the relationship is lived. This mutual blessing is exhibited in many ways, not least by enabling those engaged in such relationships to manifest the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), which they might not have done apart from the relationship. Discerning the gifts of the Spirit in a relationship is one reason a faith community blesses that relationship.

In addition, pronouncing a blessing can become an important occasion for deepening the process of sanctification. Many couples desire this — and they need it. God can use the vulnerability of intimacy and the giving of ourselves to another to expose our weaknesses, make us better, set us apart, and spur our moral growth. The Church in turn can witness to the sanctifying work of the Spirit as God transforms the energy of eros into the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

A blessing changes a couple as they become more aware of God’s grace and are commissioned by the Church to bear witness to the paschal mystery. A blessing changes the Church as well: holiness of life is made more manifest, so the community becomes accountable for supporting the couple as they grow into the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

Entering into a covenant of faithfulness with another human being is one among many ways Christians live out their baptismal calling in the world. As covenantal households are shaped by lives given over to service, compassion, generosity, and hospitality, the grace encountered at the eucharistic table is further manifested in the world. Thus, the fruitfulness of covenantal relationships and the blessings they offer to the Church belong to the mission of the Church in its ongoing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and our hope of union with God. This is the very source of our desire for communion with another.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Breidenthal, “Sanctifying Nearness,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 345.

## 4. The Church's Challenge: Christian Unity and Biblical Interpretation

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O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace:  
 Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our  
 unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may  
 hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and  
 one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God  
 and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in  
 one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one  
 mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.  
 — “For the Unity of the Church,” BCP, 818

Christian unity with God and one another in Christ is a precious gift; likewise, our differences as believers are gifts to be honored because these differences belong to God's created order. Through these gifts we are equipped for “building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:12–13).

The Book of Common Prayer (1979) encourages Episcopalians to pray for Christian unity by recalling the Pauline letter to the Ephesians. This letter reminds us that our bonds of affection are rooted not in our own efforts but in God's gracious gift in baptism. There is but one Body and one Lord. There is but one baptism, by which we are joined — heart, soul, and mind — to one another (Ephesians 4:5). Most of all, as the prayer quoted above reminds us, this baptismal unity serves the Christian call to praise and glorify God.

In baptism, God binds us to God's own self by binding us to others who are different from us, linking our salvation inextricably to the salvation of others. Furthermore, the divine gift of unity in no way relies on uniformity. We are not united, one to the other, because we agree but because God has joined us together.<sup>59</sup> The bond we share in baptism makes room for us to disagree with one another within the bonds of affection we share as members of God's own household of love and grace. We enact this unity by continuing “in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”<sup>60</sup> We cannot live into this gift on our own, but with “sighs too deep for words,” the Spirit “helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:26). The Spirit slowly takes, offers, and transforms all the prayers of those who disagree with one another to make them occasions to manifest the Body of Christ more visibly in the world and in the Church as well. In this ongoing process of sanctification, we proclaim that we are marked as Christ's own forever as members of the Body of Christ.<sup>61</sup> This foundational reality of our shared life sends us out to the world in witness to Christ's reconciling love.<sup>62</sup>

The challenges in making God's gift of unity more and more visible appear, for example, within the New Testament concerning the divisions in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 3:1–9), in Paul's reminder to the Romans that the body includes many diverse members (Romans 12:3–8), and perhaps most notably in Paul's baptism of non-Jews, which caused a debate with Peter over how to interpret their inherited Scriptures. Paul recounts this disagreement in his letter to the Galatians (2:2–21). Peter's vision (Acts 10:9–16) prior to

<sup>59</sup> See Thomas E. Breidenthal, “Communion as Disagreement,” in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker (Ropley, UK: O Books, 2005), 188–198.

<sup>60</sup> “The Baptismal Covenant,” BCP, 304.

<sup>61</sup> The centrality of baptism in our common life has been championed by a series of Anglican leaders, starting with Thomas Cranmer and including F. D. Maurice and William Reed Huntington. As Paul Avis describes it, Anglican ecclesiology depends on the insistence that “what unites us to Christ [that is, baptism] is all that is necessary to unite us, sacramentally, to each other” (*The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* [London: T&T Clark, 2007], 111).

<sup>62</sup> On baptismal ecclesiology, see Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, 22–28.



encountering Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and interacting with other Gentiles, moved him to declare that no one should be called “profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28), and to urge his fellow apostles not to withhold the water of baptism from those who had received the Holy Spirit just as they had (Acts 10:47). The inclusion of Gentiles who did not observe dietary laws within the household of the God of Israel overturned centuries of biblical interpretation.

Throughout the Church’s history, Christians have endeavored to follow that apostolic practice of prayerful deliberation in the light of Scripture and to discern the will of God — “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2) — in each new time and place. As the Body of Christ, our fundamental call is to live together not only when we agree in our discernment but also when the Spirit leads faithful Christians to hold more than one view. Different interpretations of Scripture are possible, provided they lead us to love God and one another.<sup>63</sup>

General Convention Resolution 2009-C056 acknowledges differences of opinion within The Episcopal Church concerning the interpretation of Scripture and same-sex relationships. This theological resource has presented interpretations of some of the most difficult of these biblical passages to support the covenants of same-sex couples while understanding that some members of The Episcopal Church continue to hear the word of the Lord differently in these passages. All of us have more to learn from Scripture and from each other. The Spirit baptizes us all in the name of Jesus, who is himself the Word of God and the Lord of Scripture. In faithfulness to Christ, we acknowledge and respect those differences among us in our fervent hope that disagreements over this biblical material need not divide the Church.<sup>64</sup> Anglican Christians, along with Christians in many other communions and historical eras, have discovered in ever new ways how the grace of God in Christ offers a path toward unity even in the midst of profound disagreement.<sup>65</sup>

Our disagreements today belong in the context of the agreement we do enjoy concerning biblical interpretation: the saving love and grace of God in Christ call us to be a holy people, living in faithfulness and treating the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit as we endeavor, with God’s help, to fulfill our baptismal vows to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” loving our neighbors as ourselves, to “strive for justice and peace among all people,” and to “respect the dignity of every human being.”<sup>66</sup> In such agreement, the love with which we treat each other is to be modeled on the love of God for God’s people, as well as on the life and ministry of Jesus himself.

Scripture offers little material that would address modern notions of sexual orientation, and biblical writers devoted relatively little attention to questions of same-sex relations. Biblical scholars are divided regarding the translation and interpretation of the texts most often cited on this question.<sup>67</sup> Some maintain that these texts unequivocally forbid same-sex relationships; others argue that these texts do not refer to same-sex

<sup>63</sup> Augustine of Hippo believed that the command in Genesis to “increase and multiply” (1:22, 28) applied not only to the procreation of children but also to the proliferation of textual meanings of Scripture. Augustine also believed that there were limits to multiple interpretations: no interpretation of Scripture could be considered ethically Christian if it violated the commandment to love God and one’s neighbor. See Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 59, 83–84.

<sup>64</sup> Rowan Williams has noted, for example, that writers in our shared Anglican history have often turned to “a theologically informed and spiritually sustained *patience*” as Anglican Christianity continues to grow and change. These writers, Williams says, “do not expect human words to solve their problems rapidly, they do not expect the Bible to yield up its treasures overnight. ... They know that as Christians they live among immensities of meaning, live in the wake of a divine action which defies summary explanation. They take it for granted that the believer is always learning (*Anglican Identities* [Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003], 7).

<sup>65</sup> While the Church’s history is replete with many such examples, for illustrations from Anglican history, see William L. Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism: From State Church to Global Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 4, “The Struggle to Define the Church and its Belief,” 120–63.

<sup>66</sup> “The Baptismal Covenant,” BCP, 305.

<sup>67</sup> Those texts are Genesis 1–2, Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Jude 7.

relationships as we understand them today and that each text must be interpreted within its own historical and literary contexts.<sup>68</sup>

Similar disagreements over biblical interpretation have marked the Church's life throughout its history. Faithful Christians struggled for centuries to understand whether Scripture encouraged a view of vowed religious life as a higher calling than marriage. Churches have disagreed over the biblical condemnation of "usury," which originally meant charging interest on loaned money, and whether it applies to contemporary economic systems. Protestant reformers disagreed about biblical interpretations of the eucharist and even whether particular biblical books ought to remain in the canon of Scripture. English reformers wrestled with differing biblical views concerning liturgical vestments, Church music, the relationship between Church and state, sacramental theology, and the role of ordained ministers.<sup>69</sup>

The Episcopal Church has struggled with how to interpret Scripture amid cultural change, whether concerning economic reform, divorce and remarriage, or contraception.<sup>70</sup> The practice of slavery and the role of women are two areas in which major departures from the biblical text have been especially controversial. Christians, including Episcopalians, in the 19th century used the Bible extensively to justify the institution of slavery, particularly in the United States.<sup>71</sup> In 1863, for example, Presiding Bishop John Henry Hopkins of Vermont published a paper called "Bible View of Slavery," which defended slavery as "fully authorized both in the Old and New Testament," defining it as "servitude for life, descending to the offspring."<sup>72</sup>

The struggle to ordain women in The Episcopal Church also involved deep conflicts over biblical interpretation. Supporters of women's ordination based their arguments on the gospel's promise of freedom and wholeness for all, while opponents believed that the maleness of the disciples named in the New Testament established an unalterable tradition of male priesthood.<sup>73</sup>

The Episcopal Church eventually changed its positions regarding slavery and the ordination of women. The diversity of approaches to Scripture in both cases made these decisions contentious. Serious questions continue to be posed about how we understand the authority of Scripture, not only concerning slavery and the status of women but also, now, same-sex relationships. All three of these issues have threatened to divide the Church. No one today would justify the institution of slavery, but the worldwide Anglican Communion continues to live with disagreement about ordaining women and blessing same-sex relationships. With previous generations of the faithful who struggled in similar ways, our present disagreements need not compromise our shared witness to the good news of God in Christ as we look toward that day when our partial knowledge will be complete (1 Corinthians 13:12) and when God will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).

The hope we share for that day of final fulfillment in Christ does not thereby erase the challenge of living into God's gracious gift of unity today. For most Christians, this means noting carefully the limits of acceptable

<sup>68</sup> An overview of these positions appears in an issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* devoted to same-sex marriage; it offers "two interpretations of doctrinal and scriptural faithfulness that fundamentally disagree" (Ellen T. Charry, "Preface," *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 [Winter 2011]: xiv). The two major essays in this issue of the journal originated as a project commissioned in spring 2008 by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, to be overseen by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops.

<sup>69</sup> For a history of the various ways the Church has read difficult biblical passages, see John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> For an overview of challenges in biblical interpretation for a wide range of ethical concerns in The Episcopal Church, see Robert E. Hood, *Social Teachings in the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> John Henry Hopkins, "Bible View of Slavery," *Papers from the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge*, no. 8 (1863): 132, 117; see also John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, From the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. I. Pooley and Co., 1864), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Pamela W. Darling, *New Wine: The Story of Women Transforming Leadership and Power in the Episcopal Church* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1994), 149.

differences; beyond those limits, the claim to Christian unity would prove difficult if not impossible. The challenge, then, is not whether limits to our differences exist, but how to discern when we have crossed those limits, and over what kinds of questions (whether doctrinal, moral, or liturgical, for example) we may hold differing beliefs and still remain in communion.<sup>74</sup> In the debate over same-sex relationships and biblical interpretation, Anglican Christians have disagreed about this process of discernment. Some Episcopalians have concluded that blessing such relationships goes beyond the limits of acceptable difference, and, acting on their conscience, they have parted company with The Episcopal Church, while others who disagree have chosen to remain. Our Church will continue to live with varying approaches to Scripture on this question.

At a pivotal moment among early believers, recorded in Acts 15, the possibility of including Gentiles in the Christian family sparked considerable controversy. The importance of this historical moment today lies not in the first-century differences between Jews and Gentiles but in the process of prayerful deliberation those early believers adopted. Facing the real possibility of irreparable division, the apostles sought a way to honor the centrality of Scripture while also attending carefully to the ongoing movement of the Spirit in their midst.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts that certain believers from the sect of the Pharisees were insisting that men could not be saved unless they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). As the apostles and elders in Jerusalem considered this question, Peter (who had been persuaded by Paul's point of view) confirmed the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles: "God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:8–9). James considered this testimony and concluded that the Spirit's work urged a reconsideration of Scripture and an expansion of the gospel's reach to include Gentiles (Acts 15:13–21).

Acts 15 stands among other key biblical moments in which God's people have found their vision broadened to see a new thing God is bringing about (Isaiah 43:18–21), their assumptions challenged by the outpouring of God's Spirit where they had not expected it (Numbers 11:26–29; Joel 2:28), and the startling first fruits of God's new creation in raising Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20–25). These biblical turning points, in themselves, will not settle today's disagreements, yet they urge the same apostolic process of prayerful deliberation: reliance on the centrality of Scripture while attending carefully to the Spirit's work in our midst.<sup>75</sup>

The Episcopal Church listened closely to the Spirit concerning slavery and the ordination of women. We are summoned today to listen to the narratives of sanctification and holiness within the relationships of same-sex couples and to discern and testify to the work of God in their lives. As we listen, we trust in that Spirit who, as Jesus promised, will lead us further into truth (John 16:13), praying as Christ himself did for our unity with each other in God (John 17:11) and blessing God for God's abundant goodness in Christ so that, with Paul, we may share more fully in the blessings of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:23).

<sup>74</sup> For observations concerning matters that are essential to Christian life and those over which we may have legitimate differences of opinion, see *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, 49–52.

<sup>75</sup> See Stephen E. Fowl, "How the Spirit Reads and How to Read the Spirit," in *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 97–127; Jeffrey S. Siker, "How to Decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion," *Theology Today* 51:2 (July 1994): 219–34; and Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 89–90.

## Responses to “Faith, Hope, and Love”

### a. Thomas E. Breidenthal

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In “Faith, Hope, and Love: Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships,” the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music offers a thoughtful reflection on what the Church is saying and doing when it blesses a same-sex union. The argument can be summarized as follows: (1) the Church blesses moral practices that make for holiness; (2) holiness is conformation to the mission of God; (3) the mission of God is reconciliation between God and us, and between us and one another; (4) this boils down to love of God and love of neighbor; (5) faithful, monogamous same-sex unions are good incubators of this love; (6) therefore in blessing these unions the Church sees and affirms a moral practice that makes for holiness. What we are *doing* is invoking God’s favor to develop a couple’s capacity for love of God and neighbor and to empower them for mission.

Commendably, the Standing Commission insists that blessed unions are not a private affair, but are accountable to the Christian community as a whole. The essay notes that this is true for “different-sex” couples as well, though they might “likewise find this to be a new way of thinking about their own marital vows” (III.3). Also, it invites us to approach same-sex unions in the wider context of Christian householding, thus reminding us that intentional communities (monastic and otherwise), as well as the single life, can form us for God’s mission. That mission, defined as reconciliation, is firmly grounded both in the Trinity and in our own need and capacity for community, “created in the Trinitarian image of God, an image that is inherently relational” (III.3). That image is perfected in Jesus, in whom the self-giving and eternal love of the divine persons is played out in Christ’s death and resurrection on our behalf. We are most in sync with God and with our God-given nature when we give our life for another, and we understand the paschal mystery — what Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplished — when we give our life to another and receive it back restored and transformed. Finally, “Faith, Hope, and Love” makes clear connections between self-giving and the Church’s two main sacraments. Baptism unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the eucharist sustains our union with him through a lifetime of schooling in love.

Still, this essay raises several concerns. Most importantly, the underlying argument is obscured and sometimes contradicted by undue emphasis on the preexisting goodness of the unions that we bless. The essay rightly seeks to ground Christian householding in the eucharistic pattern of the Christian life, but in so doing seems at times to blur the distinction between this ground and the practices which it supports: “[The] eucharistic pattern — often described with the actions *take*, *bless*, *break*, and *give* — shapes all the relationships that we bring into our baptismal life with God. We *take* these relationships, *bless* God for their goodness, ask God to *bless* them and *break* them open further to divine grace, so that we may *give* them to the world as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ” (III.3). This and other such statements are true taken on their own, but in combination with the claim that blessed unions are set apart just as the eucharistic bread is set apart, they convey a cumulative impression that these unions function primarily as vehicles of grace for a needy world. I do not dispute that this is a hoped-for by-product of all Christian householding, but I am not sure we should view it as its goal. As the essay itself says, the purpose of a covenanted relationship

is to help two people learn how to love each other as Christ loves us. For most of us sinners, this is accomplishment enough, and it is for the grace to achieve such love for one person in one lifetime that couples come seeking a blessing from the Church. This is not to say that a sustained commitment to love another person completely does not mediate grace to onlookers. But it is a grace made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). It is as sinners that we enter into sacred unions, and it is only in expectation of God's sanctifying grace that we dare to call them sacred.

There is no doubt that the authors of "Faith, Hope, and Love" agree with this, since they speak of the grace required to fulfill the purpose of a covenanted union: "The Church prays for the divine grace and favor the couple will need to live into their commitment to each other with love, fidelity, and holiness of life" (III.1). Yet, strikingly, help with temptation and sin is never included among the benefits of being blessed. Thus one comes across sentences like this: "Members of a couple urge each other forward in growth, which occurs through and with the creaturely limitations that Christ took on for our good: the limits of time and the body" (III.3). What is left out here is the condition of fallen humanity that Christ did not take on, namely our sinfulness. It is our sinfulness that makes us dangerous to one another, and renders every union risky. Surely it is with this riskiness in mind that same-sex couples come seeking God's aid and the Church's support. Although the Standing Commission's essay acknowledges that dynamic, it clearly takes a backseat to a different, problematic message: the Church's blessing is first and foremost the recognition of goodness already present. I understand that impulse. We want to right the balance and repent of our old derision — or at best, our toleration — of faithful same-sex couples in our midst. It is also probably the case that since most couples coming forward for a blessing have been together for a long time, the Church experiences its act of blessing as long-overdue recognition and approval. Most of the couples that now come seeking a blessing have a long history of faithful struggle together, and many have long been vehicles of grace to those around them. But this season will soon be past, and we will see increasing numbers of gay and lesbian couples, many of them young adults, who, like their heterosexual counterparts, really are just now making the move from trial or experiment to mutual commitment. As that reality is borne in upon us, we will need to reemphasize a major element of blessing that "Faith, Hope, and Love" downplays. In blessing any covenanted union, the Church invokes God's grace to bring to fruition a holy intention rendered fragile by inexperience and sin.

This leads me to a larger question about the Church's approach to sexual morality in general. The Standing Commission does not address this topic, nor was it asked to do so. Yet their discussion of same-sex blessings begs that question, since, as I have already noted, they refer to blessed unions as being set apart: "The blessing of the eucharistic table sets us apart as the Body of Christ in the world, called and empowered to proclaim the gospel, just as the blessing of a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart as 'a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world'" (III.2, with reference to BCP, 429). In so doing, the Commission intends to stress that covenanted relationships are ordered to a specific vocation, namely, to draw others to the saving work of Christ. I agree with that intention, but I do not think we should talk about these unions being set apart. Such language suggests that lifelong unions are not necessarily the norm for sexual partners, but a particular vocation taken on by a few. To be "set apart" implies being distinguished from a group that is both normative and entirely acceptable. The obvious analogy is to clergy, who are set apart for specific ministries within the Church. Here the laypersons comprise the normative group and clergy are the exception. Yet, though our expectations of the two groups may differ somewhat, the same Baptismal Covenant obligates both. A less obvious analogy, but one central to "Faith, Hope, and Love," is to the bread set apart for the eucharist. All bread is the good work of human hands, but we set some aside to become the Body of Christ. In each case, out of something of positive value — the people of God and the bread of human labor — a part is extracted for a particular purpose to serve the Church as a whole. "Faith, Hope, and Love" suggests that as the eucharistic bread is set apart and blessed, so a covenanting couple that is blessed is set apart. But set apart from whom? Clearly, from couples who have not committed to lifelong faithful monogamy. It is not so clear how we are to regard this other, supposedly larger and normative group. If we go with the relation of laity to clergy, or of ordinary to eucharistic bread, then we imply that there is nothing amiss with couples who do not intend to be faithful and monogamous. They are like good Catholics in the

heyday of religious orders who chose marriage over celibacy. Do we intend to draw a similarly benign contrast between sexually involved couples who intend lifelong monogamous fidelity and those who do not? Have we abandoned the principle that sex should *ordinarily* go hand in hand with commitment to permanence, however much we may fall short of that ideal? If that is the case, we should admit it. If it is not the case, we need to say so.

Perhaps I am objecting to the language of this document because theological statements can and do generate ancillary questions. Here's one about the eucharist, which has a bearing on the discussion so far. Why does "Faith, Hope, and Love" refer constantly to the *blessing* of bread and wine in the eucharist, and not, as is more usual in our tradition, to their *consecration*? The essay repeatedly refers to the blessing of the eucharistic bread and wine, and, quoting 1 Corinthians 10:16, to "the cup of blessing that we bless" (see III.2 and III.3). It goes on to point out that the Great Thanksgiving is deeply rooted in the Jewish understanding of blessing. To bless something is to bless God who made it, and in so doing to reveal its essential goodness as coming from God's hands. All this is true, and its bearing on what it means to bless anything is obvious. But to restrict the eucharistic action to blessing diminishes it. We do not merely set the elements of bread and wine apart for a sacred purpose. Having thanked God, we invoke the Holy Spirit to make Christ present to us in them. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not" (to complete Paul's phrase) "a communion in the blood of Christ?" By the Spirit the elements are changed; they become Christ for us. By the same Spirit we are made Christ's body — the exodus body into which we are incorporated in baptism. There is a reason why the Book of Common Prayer refers to this transformation as consecration, not blessing (BCP, 408). To bless is, indeed, to acknowledge something good and to commend it to God's use. By contrast, to consecrate is to set something apart in the expectation that something essential about it will be changed. We believe that the elements of bread and wine become the body and the blood of Christ. As Anglicans, we refrain from explicating that change further (transubstantiation? consubstantiation? real presence?), but we do insist on the change. This is why the eucharistic action is not only *anamnesis* (a recalling of what God has done for us), but requires *epiclesis*, going beyond the Jewish prayer of blessing to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine that they may become Christ for us.

I draw attention to this distinction between blessing and consecration, not only because it has a bearing on our understanding of the eucharist, but because it has a bearing on our understanding of the Church's blessing of sexual unions. We reserve the term "consecration" for change which effects union with Christ, whether of the eucharistic elements or the gathered Church, or, secondarily, as a synonym for ordination, understood as a setting apart to represent the Church as the Body of Christ. It is in union with Christ that the Church blesses. Christ's "This is my body" at the last supper, which anticipates his self-offering on the cross, also goes beyond the Jewish blessing. In addition to blessing his Father, and so acknowledging the bread and wine as coming from his hand, Jesus gives himself to us. In so doing he bestows life, healing, power, protection, comfort, and direction on us. This bestowal is the fullness of what Christians mean by a blessing. Christ's offering of himself cannot be understood apart from its Jewish ground — gratitude to God for gifts received in right relation to God — but it goes beyond this ground to stand in identification with God as God's Word, both to bestow the gifts of the Spirit and to cooperate with the Spirit in its work.

So blessing is, first and foremost, Christ's blessing. This is a blessing poured out on sinners from the cross. It is only in the acknowledgment of our sin that we can receive this blessing thankfully. But when we do receive it thankfully, we enter into communion with Christ, because we own his death for us and, in thankful response, are moved to spend the rest of our lives dying to sin. This is why Paul says that the cup of blessing is a communion in the blood of Christ. Our thanksgiving — that is, our blessing of God — comes at the price of repentance and loss. It is when our thanksgiving passes through that narrow door that our offering is accepted and returned to us as holy, bringing us into the presence of our risen Savior and transforming us into his Body. Here, and only here, can we speak properly of the Church as offering its own or God's blessing to anyone. The Church blesses as the Body of Christ, but does so as a Body redeemed from sin — a joyful Body, to be sure, but a chastened and humbled Body, too. We are always sinners blessing sinners.

This sensibility is discernible at various points in “Faith, Hope, and Love,” but its various elements never quite coalesce. Once again, my hunch is that its authors were avoiding any suggestion that people in same-sex unions struggle with sin, lest they expose such unions once again to being singled out as especially sinful. I acknowledge the charity at play here. But in the long run we gain ground only if, for same-sex or heterosexual unions, a clear line is drawn from sin to repentance, from repentance to grace, from grace to thanksgiving.

## b. John E. Goldingay

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When I lived in England, I knew quite well two women who had lived together for most of their adult lives. I have reason to think it was a celibate relationship, but I have no basis for knowing whether they felt any sexual attraction. I can imagine them giving each other a kiss or a hug before they went to bed each night in their separate bedrooms. I might call their relationship quasi-covenantal; in their latter years, one of them had a stroke, and the other looked after her and continued to make it possible for them to share a church involvement and to take holidays together. The one on whom fell the major responsibility for caring once commented wryly on the similarity of her situation and mine, because I had a similar responsibility for my disabled wife.

It has been instructive for me to reflect on the “faith, hope, and love” expressed in that relationship, and I could be glad to pray for God’s blessing on it — indeed, I probably did so. I am sad that it is harder nowadays for such relationships to happen and to flourish without their being imagined to be something else.

Most of the essay on “Faith, Hope, and Love” comprises helpful reminders on the Church’s mission, on blessing, on covenant, and on unity. But how far do these reminders apply to the blessing of same-sex relationships (with the connotations this phrase has in our culture)? The essay refers to the earlier study commissioned by the House of Bishops, which issued in a report outlining a “liberal” and a “traditionalist” position regarding same-sex relationships. I was a member of the traditionalist group within the task force that produced the study. “Faith, Hope, and Love” goes with the liberal position, as it must if it is to provide support for the development of resources for the blessings of same-sex relationships. My comments here, therefore, largely restate aspects of the traditionalist position.

First, the biblical arguments. To begin with, let us agree that Genesis 18–19 is irrelevant in light of the fact that no one is arguing for the kind of sexual relationships described there. On the other hand, one might note that Scripture does speak of same-sex relationships, such as those between Naomi and Ruth and between David and Jonathan, that offer models for thinking about relationships like that between my two friends. (It has of course been speculated that the two biblical relationships were same-sex relationships in our sense, but the stories offer no pointer to that possibility — and the Old Testament does not shy away from referring to sex when it is a significant aspect of a narrative; further, it is unlikely that the books describing these relationships would have envisaged that possibility, or that the books would have found acceptance into the canon of Scripture on that hypothesis.)

The arguments that Genesis 1–2 need not imply a validation of heterosexual relationships alone are not convincing. Genesis 1 talks about male and female in connection with the fulfillment of God’s purpose in creation and the fruitfulness of humankind. Humanity’s blessing and proliferation through heterosexual relationships is implied in the creation of male and female. The traditionalist document quotes Anglican biblical scholar Gordon Wenham, writing on Genesis: “Here then we have a clear statement of the divine purpose of marriage: positively, it is for the procreation of children; negatively, it is a rejection of the ancient

oriental fertility cults.”<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:24 is explicitly about heterosexual marriage: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” While “one flesh” may suggest more than their sexual relationship, it hardly means less. Further, one reason why it is not good for the man to be alone is that he cannot generate children. He needs help if he is to do so. Procreation is integral to marriage’s purpose, and is the reason why marriage involves a man and a woman. So the centerpiece in the vision of human marriage in Genesis is not intimacy, relationship, or romance, but family. The man and the woman will be the means and context in which the family will grow so as to serve God and the land. This point in itself does not exclude same-sex marriages, but it does not point to their being an equally valid option.

In Romans 1, sexual relationships between people of the same sex are an expression of human waywardness and of the rejection of the truth, and a result of God’s wrath operating in the world. It is important to note that Paul sees such relationships as a *result* of God’s wrath operating against sin in the world, not a *cause* of that wrath. Heterosexual people are as much implicated in this waywardness (not least in our sexual relationships) as people involved in same-sex relationships, which is reason for us to identify with our brothers and sisters involved in same-sex relationships, not to repudiate or shame them.

First Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:10 offer lists of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, lists that include people involved in homosexual behavior and people who are greedy, rebellious, and guilty of certain other sins. The lists do not look as if they are intended to be comprehensive and do not imply that a distinctive shame attaches to that particular sin. Both passages use the term *arsenokoitai*, which denotes men who lie with another man as with a woman. It echoes the proscription in Leviticus, and thus suggests that the New Testament understands Leviticus to be proscribing a practice that was more than a matter of purity and impurity. First Corinthians 6:9 also use the word *malakoi*, a term in Hellenistic Greek for someone who is the passive partner in a same-sex relationship. The use of both terms undermines the argument that these passages are especially concerned with pederasty.

On the basis of its study of such passages, the traditionalist argument in the report to the House of Bishops concluded, “The one-flesh pattern of heterosexual marriage in Genesis was the background for the descriptions of sinful behavior in the letters to Timothy, to the Corinthians, and to the Romans. Because homosexual behavior was more common in the Greco-Roman world, there was a need to update and expand the list of actions contrary to the Decalogue by including homosexual behavior along with theft, adultery, and so on.”<sup>2</sup> It would be more realistic to infer that the Scriptures’ perspective on this subject is limited than to infer that our culture enables us to clarify its meaning as being open to affirming same-sex relationships.

Second, the question of mission and context. In the world as it was designed “from the beginning,” marriage involved the lifelong commitment of one man and one woman as the context for raising a family. At least four forms of relationship come one point short of that vision: polygamy; marriage that avoids having children; marriage in which one person has a still-living divorced partner; and same-sex relationships.

To express the matter thus is not to imply that all of these four forms of relationship have the same theological or ethical status, but I find it helpful to see that there is a partial analogy between them. Within my own extended family and circle of friends are marriages that involve a partner whose former spouse is still living, a marriage where the couple has avoided having children, people who are in same-sex relationships, and someone who comes from a polygamous marriage. I would like to be able to seek God’s blessing on such marriages and relationships, but I am unclear in what sense I can do so, as I could for the couple I described at the beginning of this response to the essay.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John E. Goldingay, Grant R. LeMarquand, George R. Sumner, and Daniel A. Westberg, “Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology: A View from the Traditionalists,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 (Winter 2011): 24–25.

<sup>2</sup> “A View from the Traditionalists,” 27.



Two of those four forms of union appear in Scripture; two do not. I find it helpful to look at the two that do not appear in light of the way Scripture speaks of the two that do.

Jesus explicitly discusses divorce, and provides the helpful insight into the Torah that the Torah deals with both the ideal world (how things were from the beginning) and how things are in the world we know, where human hardness of heart is a reality. Deuteronomy's acceptance of divorce belongs in the latter category. Jesus does not bring a new standard of his own to the question, but affirms the visionary standard within the Torah. Elsewhere, he describes the entirety of the Torah and the Prophets as an outworking of love for God and love for one's neighbor, and one can see how this description applies to the Deuteronomic rule that presupposes divorce. Marriages do break down, and in a traditional society women may then be in an especially vulnerable position. The rule about giving a woman divorce papers is an expression of love that offers them some protection.

The Torah and the Prophets also acknowledge the practice of polygamy. They implicitly recognize problems polygamy can solve; they certainly portray problems it can generate. They do not explicitly say that it stands in tension with the creation vision for marriage, but this inference seems plausible. I can imagine Jesus taking a similar view of polygamy to the one he takes of divorce.

The Bible does not refer to the committed, covenantal same-sex relationships that are presupposed by our discussion of blessing such relationships, but I take them to have a similar status. They, too, do not correspond to the creation ideal but reflect the reality of human hardness of heart. Paul's comments in Romans encourage us to think not so much in terms of the individual hardness of heart of the people involved in these relationships, but of the hard-heartedness of humanity as a whole.

Considering these four issues together also helps us take into account the sociological and cultural factors involved in our thinking about these relationships, to which the essay refers in the section on mission. On the one hand, 50 years ago divorce was much less common than is now the case, and the Church did not marry divorced people. (As a newly ordained priest in England, I recall initiating the arrangement for a couple's wedding before it transpired that the divorced man was describing himself as a bachelor on the basis that he was no longer married.) Twenty-five years ago, I blessed the marriage of a woman and a man who had been divorced; in England, I could not have done so in a church, but I could in our seminary chapel (the woman is now an archdeacon). In the 21st century, one of my own bishops has commented that she is hesitant about approving a marriage for someone who has been twice-divorced, but she sometimes does so. A big change in attitude and practice to divorce in the Church has come about not because we have studied Scripture and the Church's tradition more, but because of sociological and cultural factors. There are positive and negative aspects to this development.

With regard to same-sex relationships, there are parallel sociological and cultural considerations. One is the general sexualization of U.S. culture. Another is the collapse of the old family structures of which unattached people could be a part (the study's material on household is helpful in this connection). Related is the general assumption that people will be involved in sexual activity, and the apparent quaintness of the idea that it should not be so. Another is the ease with which people of same-sex attraction can engage in sexual activity without thereby earning public disapproval. Another is the increasing legal recognition of same-sex partnerships or marriage in Western countries. A further aspect of the cultural shift is the assumption that marrying someone of the same sex is simply a matter of proper freedom and choice. There is no moral difference between the two forms of relationship. That view also seems obvious to many Christians, who then add that neither is any theological difference involved.

Yet while same-sex relationships thus seem as "natural" to some people as heterosexual relationships seem, the jury is still out on the scientific questions on same-sex relationships, as is noted in the study of "Biological Mechanisms in Homosexuality: A Critical Review" in *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality*.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> David de Pomerai, "Biological Mechanisms in Homosexuality: A Critical Review" in Philip Groves, ed., *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: A Resource to Enable Listening and Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2008), 268–292.

essay's section on mission notes these cultural circumstances in which we take part in God's mission, and in particular the "shift in cultural perspectives" on sexuality. It can be read as implying that we must go along with the cultural shift. Yet there surely can be cultural shifts that we do not go along with. The fact that there is a cultural shift is a fact that we need to take into account, but our mission might be to confront it, not baptize it. One way we might be able to get some perspective on cultural shifts and on our relationship to them is by looking at ourselves from the perspective of people in other cultures, and particularly other churches. We might note the analogy between the way many Western people are appalled by polygamy, while many people in traditional societies are appalled by same-sex relationships or serial monogamy. It is particularly unfortunate that we as a Church do not seek to look at ourselves from other perspectives in this way and can seem simply to assume that we are the enlightened.

Nor does acceptance of same-sex relationships parallel the abolition of slavery, the proscribing of racism, the elimination of woman's subordination, or the acceptance of women's ordination. In each of these areas, there is material in Scripture that explicitly expresses what I have called God's vision as well as material that makes allowance for human hardness of heart. There is nothing in Scripture that expresses a vision for same-sex relationships.

I close with a further adaptation of words from the traditionalist submission to the House of Bishops. The lack of clarity concerning same-sex attraction on the part of biological and social scientists, the wounds in much of the rest of the Anglican Communion caused by our unilateral action, and the apparent implications of Scripture and the Church's tradition all make it hard to see how the essay's useful material on blessing can be applied to same-sex relationships.

I appreciate the fact that the essay itself closes with a challenge concerning Christian unity and biblical interpretation. I know priests who are afraid that the time will come when a bishop will withhold a license from them if they are not prepared to bless same-sex relationships or (in due course) to conduct same-sex marriages. It will be nice if the essay's closing challenge will mean that people who do not accept the Church's new stance on same-sex relationships will not be excluded from its ministry.

### c. Deirdre Good

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I thank the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music for their important reflections on the theological resources of the Episcopal Church for same-sex relationships. My invited response simply indicates that I have been, since my marriage to Julian Sheffield in 2008, in a different place. This description of our same-sex marriage service is offered as a contribution to the discussion, as our Church moves toward what I hope will be the recognition and use of a single marriage service for same-sex and different-sex couples.

When we planned our wedding in 2008, it proved strikingly easy to modify a few single words in the Book of Common Prayer's Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage so that two persons of the same sex could administer the sacrament to each other with integrity. Why this was the case is something that bears reflection.

First, the words.

*The Book of Common Prayer* has the celebrant declare at the outset, "Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of *this man and this woman* in Holy Matrimony." Our wedding service substituted: "Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of *these women* in Holy Matrimony."

The Declaration of Consent is repeated without a change in language: "N., will you have this woman to be your wife ... ?"

In the Ministry of the Word, the opening lines of the prayer change from “O gracious and everliving God, you have created us male and female in your image: Look mercifully upon *this man and this woman* who come to you seeking your blessing,” to “O gracious and everliving God, you have created us in your image: Look mercifully upon *these women* who come to you seeking your blessing.” These changes render without distortion the idea that humanity is created in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27).

Following the vows, instead of the celebrant saying the words, “I now pronounce that they are husband and wife,” our priest presiding said, “I now pronounce you married.” In our case, in a state that legalized same-sex marriage, this recognized our relationship in both legal and religious spheres.

Second: the possible reasons.

Marriage realizes an order in creation. Here we join with those who state that Christianity is a “deeply material religion,” regarding the “knowledge of God as mediated through ... creation.”<sup>4</sup> The presence of God in the world is made accessible in the central doctrine of the Incarnation by means of which God is known not simply through experience of the physical world but one in which God becomes part of creation, being born as a human being. Thus God can be known as a person directly. Christianity elevates the dignity of the human person now made to be a participant with God in the safeguarding of the cosmos and in recognition of finitude. As to the creation of humanity and the institution of marriage, we disagree that experience of male/female sexual relations best interprets that order; we think instead that the order of creation is best known within the sanctifying relation of Christ and the Church as *ekklesia* or community (Tyndale: congregation). This is to say that we think the diversity of creation is realized and perfected in the community of Christ. Thus our minimalist modification of the BCP’s Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage deemphasizes the male-female or “complementarian” element of the marriage typology while stressing and amplifying the unitive and egalitarian dimension of the Christological analogy or “mystery.” This functions to enhance what we have come to recognize and understand as the implicit unitive elements of the service.

We believe marriage is a discipline. The discipline of marriage relies on the difficulty of living with another “in prosperity and adversity” (BCP, 423), not to avoid our faults, but precisely to expose them — so that they can be healed. Nor does the clause “when they hurt each other” included in the prayers (BCP, 429) confine itself to minor slights. Since hurt and acknowledgment — sin and confession — are central to Christian growth and the sacraments, this prayer sets their discipline in the theater of the whole fallen world. What matters in a marriage is not whether the ministers of that marriage to each other are same- or differently-sexed; what matters is that they were separate and they become united. The existing Prayer Book rite does an extraordinarily good job of expressing that uniting for couples of whatever sexual orientation, setting them on the path that will “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” (BCP, 429).

#### d. Dora Rudo Mbuwayesango

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I commend the members of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music for their dedication and good work in producing for the Church this much-needed resource for the blessing of same-sex relationships. Lesbians and gays have always been accepted by God as part of God’s good creation and part of God’s redeemed people, and I am glad that the Episcopal Church is now ready to recognize a dawning of the kingdom of God in our time. The essay lays out well why we should have a liturgy for blessing same-sex

<sup>4</sup> Edward Norman, *An Anglican Catechism* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 15.

relationships. The following is my humble contribution to the furthering of the conversation that General Convention requested of the Standing Commission.

### *III.1. The Church's Call: A Focus on Mission*

The place of blessings in the mission of the Church is well put: “The public affirmation of the blessing of a covenantal relationship also sets that relationship apart for a sacred purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sustaining love of God.” As “Faith, Hope, and Love” affirms in its preface, “Everything we do as Christians is meant to express the Church’s call to participate in God’s own mission in the world.” The missional character of blessing lies in the truth that one is blessed in order to serve.

While it is true that this missional understanding of blessing is located in Scripture, the passages given from the Hebrew Bible do not seem to reflect that point. The witness from the book of Genesis seen in Abraham (12:2b) and Jacob (28:14b) would need to be read through Galatians 3:8, where Paul interprets it to include the extension of blessings to the Gentiles. In the context of Genesis there are two ways to understand these verses. In the first place those other nations’ blessings was dependent on their treatment of either Abraham or Jacob. Secondly, Abraham’s blessing extends beyond the individual in the sense of its extension to his direct descendants (Gen. 15:12–21; 17:1–8). But passages like Micah 4:1–4 and Isaiah 2:2–4 better demonstrate this missional understanding of blessing: God’s grace in elevating Jerusalem/Zion will result in the revelation of God and in greater service to the other nations in the establishment of justice and peace among and within the nations.

*Worship and Mission: An Eschatological Vision.* Worship equips for mission in the realization of the just reign of God. Rites of blessing by the Church, of which the blessing of covenantal relationships is a part, equip couples with the grace necessary to “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” (BCP 429). The Church’s vocation is in bringing up the just reign of God. And the just reign of God does not participate in the unjust marginalization of segments of persons who are part of God’s creation.

*Same-Sex Relationships and the Church’s Mission.* It is a pity that the Church, in many ways, has been challenged by culture instead of challenging culture in recognizing the humanity of lesbian and gay persons. In fact, Christians have often stood, and in many ways continue to stand, in the way of granting human and civil rights to this important segment of humanity. But I am glad that the Episcopal Church is finally striving to do what the Spirit is leading it to do in affirming same-sex relationships. The many ways that same-sex relationships contribute to the mission of the Church are well presented in this section. But I would like to point to one aspect that has significance on the use of the marriage metaphor for the divine–human relationship. This metaphorical depiction of the divine–human relationship in the biblical texts (particularly in the prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) is characterized by an association of divine love, compassion, commitment, and reconciliation with divine wrath and punishment in the form of the rape and mutilation of women. Patriarchy’s gender hierarchy and androcentric bias privileged male sexuality in a way that distorted human sexuality in general. And when that metaphor is used to depict the divine–human bond, the image of that bond is also distorted. Same-sex relationships have the potential to model mutuality in sexual relationships, which, in turn, redeems the metaphor of sexual bond for the divine–human covenant relationship: the Church can then celebrate and live up to its identity as the Bride of Christ.

*The Challenge of God’s Blessings for Mission.* A large part of Christ’s mission was to expand the horizon of the kingdom of God. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ broke geographical and temporal boundaries. During his ministry, Jesus did not limit himself to those who thought they belonged, but made it a point to reach out to those whom others thought did not belong, and he was criticized for it. Jesus went beyond the earlier, limited attempts to expand the horizons: “To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give ... an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants ... — these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a

house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:4–7). Unlike the prophet Isaiah, who advocated for those ready on their own to come, Jesus went out seeking them. Acts 10 shows us how the lessons from the past and the model of Jesus does not make us immune to this shortcoming. But as history as shown us in the development of the Church’s traditions, we need the Holy Spirit to continue to nudge us in the right direction every time God reveals a segment of society overlooked and excluded from experiencing the abundance of God’s grace in the kingdom of God.

### *III.2. The Church’s Joy: A Theology of Blessing*

Same-sex blessings are now part of communal worship — they are outward and visible signs of God’s grace. I would like to underscore the fact that “the grace and blessing of God already discerned in a couple’s relationship does not thereby render a liturgical rite of blessing redundant.” As in the context of holiness depicted in the Torah, God makes holy and the community enact holiness. In the case of holiness, humans do rituals to enact the holiness established by God. So God and people mutually construct holiness — God declares and people enact it through rites.

The extension of the blessing to all nations becomes much more evident in Christ. The references in the Old Testament are problematic especially in Genesis 12:3 and much more limited in Isaiah 56 (see my comment above). Paul’s interpretation of Genesis 12:3 makes the ultimate inclusion of all people that is evident in Jesus’ ministry and that of the early Church.

Indeed, “baptism and eucharist focus our attention on the particular blessings of the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection.” And these blessings then “encourage us to discern the many other ways God’s blessing is manifested in both creation and covenant.” We do not want to be blind to the potential vehicles for blessings, especially the love and faithfulness of covenantal relationship. As one-sided, abusive, and corrupt as marriage often was in ancient Israel, its focus on faithfulness nonetheless made it a suitable metaphor for the divine–human covenant. In the Old Testament, the wife was considered the property of the husband and thus the wife’s faithfulness to her husband was absolute, while the same was not required of the husband. Faithfulness in love is what makes sexual bonds a vehicle for blessings.

I think one of the elements of God’s blessings that bears emphasis is the abundance of God’s blessing and grace. I am glad that this is very much emphasized in the essay. I think not realizing that abundance was one of the shortcomings of the religious leaders in Jesus’ day and continues to be manifested in our day. Jesus demonstrated the abundance of God’s blessings in his teachings and actions. In some ways Jesus himself seems to have struggled with that reality, and it may have taken the Canaanite woman’s challenge — “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matt. 15:27) — for Jesus to acknowledge the abundance of God’s blessings.

### *III.3. The Church’s Life: Covenantal Relationship*

*Creation, Baptism, and Eucharist.* The prophets do use marriage as a metaphor for the bond between God and the people of Israel, but we should take note that most of those uses are tied to judgment. We should also take into consideration the patriarchal nature of marriage that put women in a disadvantaged and subordinate position to men, which is indicated in Ephesians 5:21–33. I believe that same-sex relationships help us to clearly see and demonstrate mutuality in committed sexual relationships because acts of love are not gendered and hierarchal.

*Loving Our Neighbor as Ourselves.* It is very important and insightful to recognize the concept of hospitality that governed the accounts in Genesis 19 and Judges 19, which is the focus of these stories. Also, the stories are about the gang rape of a male individual and not mutual sexual relationships between consenting individuals. The gang rape of women is not acceptable since Lot’s daughters are divinely protected and the rape of the Levite’s wife in Judges leads to civil war. Patriarchy and hetero-normativity govern how sexuality is depicted in these narratives and in the biblical narratives as a whole. Hospitality should not be extended only to some parts of humanity but to *all* humanity, whether female or male, heterosexual or homosexual,

bisexual or transgender. The model of hospitality in these narratives should be critiqued as inadequate. Hospitality extended to all will result in the safety of all.

*Called into Covenant.* Covenants are lived in community and as Christians the Church is our community, and thus bears witness to individual and communal covenants. The Church then “rightly celebrates these moments of covenantal vocation” and calls us to live in households shaped by “deepening faithful intimacy.”

*The Vocation of Households.* I am appreciative of the attempt to tackle biblical passages that are obscure and yet have been used to support heterosexuality, in opposition to same-sex sexuality. I would like to add that the Bible’s construct of sexuality is limited by a concern for procreation and thus ignores all other sexual expressions, whether they are heterosexual or non-heterosexual. In other words, what we have in the Bible is not a definition of sexuality but procreation sexuality, and that makes it a very narrow and limited view of sexuality.

*Faithful Intimacy.* We need to acknowledge the problems that are found in the biblical use of sexual intimacy to reflect God’s relationship with humanity. In the Hebrew Bible, in particular, the metaphor is mostly used by the prophets to depict Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s judgment and punishment. God’s desire and love are intricately tied to the “justified” abuse of the unfaithful wife. The sexual bond has to be untangled from its connection to sexual abuse before it should be readily accepted as a positive metaphor for God’s love and desire for God’s people. In the same way, the limitation of Genesis 1 and 2 have to be acknowledged when these are taken as defining sexuality. The broad framework of Genesis 1 and 2 has to be accepted, and when we see only the individuals in these texts we may be missing the point. Paul himself may be very wrong in seeing individuals as being in the image of God. I would suggest that humanity as a whole is in the image of God, and whatever our individual genders or sexualities, all of us together make the image of God. And together we are fruitful.

#### *III.4. The Church’s Challenge: Christian Unity and Biblical Interpretation*

When we recite the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed in our liturgies we acknowledge the universal Church. There are many elements of the human experience that make us disagree in certain areas of faith, and while unity as a Church is of great value, we should not hold on to that unity when it hinders the eschatological vision. The love of Christ compels us to seek justice for all humanity as we follow the model of Christ to love. I think the fact that the Gospel of John depicts Jesus praying for the unity of his disciples (John 17:20–24) reflects the difficulty of forging and maintaining that unity in an imperfect world. As we strive for that unity, we should not lose focus on God’s mission and our mission in the world.

#### *Concluding Wish*

It is my hope that subsequent editions of the rites for the blessing of same-sex relationships will not seem to reflect that they are inferior to different-sex relationships. I also hope that our limited understanding of the blessedness of same-sex relationships will deepen and expand, and will no longer be as dependent on our understanding of different-sex or heterosexual marriage.

### e. George R. Sumner

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I have been requested to respond to the document called “Faith, Hope, and Love: Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships.” This is actually not the first time I have been asked by the Episcopal Church to weigh in on this subject. I was a traditionalist member of the House of Bishops’ Theology Committee, which met over two years and at considerable expense to the Church, beginning in 2008. Our group was a congenial and generous-spirited one, and we presented both sides of the theology of marriage

in relation to same-sex relations, along with rebuttals of the opposing team's claims. Our work was presented to the House of Bishops and was eventually published in the *Anglican Theological Review* in the Winter 2011 issue. Our document did not receive any mention in the introduction to "Faith, Hope, and Love," though it is cited in a footnote in the last section, on Christian unity. Apparently the Church has moved beyond the point where two points of view need to be represented in official reflection on this issue. I will not attempt to summarize all our points in this short piece, since anyone interested can find the complete essays at the *Anglican Theological Review* website. As for the more recent document, it is an articulate presentation of the progressive position, but does not break any new ground. It will reinforce the views of those who agree, but offers little of interest for those who do not.

As to the prior committee of which I was a part, after two years of work, it was clear to most of us that the matter came down to culture. The revisionist case cannot be made from the Bible, tradition, or science, and there were moments of candor on this score from the progressive side. Is the new trend a wind of the Spirit, or not? Can the stool in question stand on that one leg? I am by trade a missiologist, and so it was interesting for me to note how the tag *missio Dei* was deployed to bolster the progressive argument. It was claimed that what God is now doing in the world trumped all other evidence. But some historical study around the concept of the *missio* tag reveals the tendency we humans have to conflate the trajectory of God's work in the world with our own political predilections, when our perception is unaided by Scripture and tradition.

As to the politics of the moment, conservative Episcopalians are in an awkward position. Even as these resources for same-sex blessing rites are being appropriated by the Church, consideration of marriage itself has begun. There is a strong suggestion that a proposed change to the rite of marriage cannot be far behind. I believe that the move to bless same-sex unions was a mistake, but I also believe that proceeding on to marriage, and ensconcing the change in the Book of Common Prayer, would exacerbate the problem. That move would enflame the conflict further, especially in the Anglican Communion. It would threaten to move the new liturgical practice from option to coercion. It would put at risk the credibility of liberal leaders who told their flocks they only supported blessings. It would show a lack of the patience which is implied in the idea of doctrinal reception. It would fail to hear the voice of wisdom saying "enough is enough."

If the Church is not really interested in hearing from conservative theologians like me on this issue, what am I to do with the remainder of my airtime? The truly pressing issue before the Church is the following: Will room be found for the loyal opposition, for conservative Episcopalians? Is our Church to be truly liberal, and will it live up to the claim it makes about its own comprehensiveness? After all our talk about "the other" nowadays, what will liberal Episcopalians do with the fact that "the other" is in many cases a traditional Evangelical or Anglo-Catholic or charismatic? Years ago, at an event for Episcopal Foundation fellows, my friend Paul Zahl said that the great ethical challenge for those in power in the national Church now is how to deal with its relatively powerless conservative minority. This question is yet more urgent when that minority also happens to have the weight of the tradition and the strongest bonds of affection with the wider Communion on its side.

I was taught in my seminary days about F. D. Maurice's vision of a kind of liberal Anglicanism that needed all its parties, each one challenging the other like flint. I have my own issues with Maurice, but surely he was the forerunner of modern Anglicanism. Is there the will, not to mention the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, on the part of the majority, to live out this vision? Will the Church encourage that freedom of theological expression which we are proud of in the breadth of our tradition? Do we mean it when we talk about the value of conscience in our Anglican tradition, especially for dioceses and parishes in the coming years? In this vein, is the Church willing to guarantee them access to the traditional rite of marriage, come what may, as a concrete step toward assuring a real comprehensiveness? I was, I assume, asked to respond to this document as a gesture of inclusion, and so it is the question of real and costly inclusion that I wish to bring before the Church.

## f. Fredrica Harris Thompsett

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I do remember my baptism. I was an eight-year-old Episcopalian and fascinated by the strong promises made in my behalf. The minister used the office for children, yet we — my twin brother and I — kept adding in the “I will’s” and “I do’s.” The promise that we might be granted the “power and strength” to “triumph against the devil, the world, and the flesh” (1928 BCP, 278) was, to say the least, unforgettable to my young mind. This was strong stuff, well worthy of the joyous family celebration that followed.

Recently the modern liturgical renewal movement has strengthened and brought Holy Baptism into greater visibility across many denominations. For Episcopalians these positive revisions in Holy Baptism are represented in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Today there are more occasions for congregations to celebrate Holy Baptism and together commit and recommit themselves to the challenges conveyed in the Baptismal Covenant. This liturgical shift has restored baptism’s prominence in shaping our religious identity both as individuals and as worshiping communities. As a theologian and historian, I know that these changes in contemporary liturgies of baptism not only restore early Christian practices, they also align with distinct Anglican theological emphases.

Baptism is foundational. When I reflect theologically on how God is working today in our relationships and faithful living, I am drawn again and again to consider promises made and reaffirmed in baptism. Of particular importance in baptism and other sacraments is the generosity of God’s covenantal love. Today’s celebrations of baptism move us liturgically closer to glimpsing and understanding covenanting partnerships. Moreover, in our experience of promises publicly made in gathered community, we are affirming and welcoming individual lifetimes of godly living. We are moving away from worship patterns that unintentionally privatized and obscured the fact of God’s great goodness in creation. In blessing lifelong relationships we are also, I believe, representing significant aspects of our Anglican heritage. Both in traditional marriage rites and in the proposed blessing of committed relationships of same-sex couples, the characteristics I first encountered as an eight-year-old child have been strengthened and extended.

For some Episcopalians the impetus to respond to our sisters and brothers who are gay and lesbian by providing ways to bless same-sex couples is primarily occasioned by secular cultural changes and has little to do with theological understandings. In this brief essay I wish to point to the theological continuity of our baptismal practices with the current call to reflect on how God is working today in committed same-sex relationships. In effect, the patterns of worship our Prayer Book prescribes have strengthened understanding of committed lifelong relationships. Three overlapping theological components are central both to baptism and to blessing same-sex unions. These are: (1) deepened insight into our covenantal relationship with God in Christ; (2) the public character and value of individuals and congregations sharing God’s blessings; and (3) continuity with positive Anglican perspectives on committed intimate relationships.

Like most biblical covenants, the Baptismal Covenant is deeply grounded in the generosity of God’s love. Our Hebraic ancestors, whether in the covenants of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, or Jeremiah, emphasized the steadfast loving-kindness of the Creator. The Hebrew word *hesed* is frequently used in these biblical texts. It is usually translated as “loving-kindness” and associated as a sure and steadfast foundation for covenantal living. There is nothing simple or short-lived about covenantal love. The foundation for covenantal theology is the expectant love and uncompromising faithfulness that God holds for God’s people for generations to come. Our biblical ancestors emphasized the magnitude of God’s empowering action, call, and summons into lifelong relationship. Biblical expressions of covenant thinking today are central for those of us who wish to be addressed by God and respond to God’s presence in our lives.

Over the past 35 years, guided by the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, Episcopalians have become more familiar with the concept of covenantal relationships with God. This is underscored educationally in the



Outline of the Faith, which describes a covenant as “a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith” (BCP, 846). It is underscored liturgically in the Baptismal Covenant (BCP, 304–305). Baptism is an expression of a sacramental covenant in which we are adopted, that is chosen, as God’s own children and incorporated into full membership in Christ’s Church. In the Synoptic Gospels’ telling of our Lord’s baptism, Jesus is proclaimed as God’s “Son, the Beloved,” with whom God is “well pleased” (Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22b). In our baptism we too are adopted as God’s “own children” and “marked as Christ’s own for ever” (BCP, 311, 308). Baptism reveals God’s generosity in creation, God’s steadfast loving-kindness. God’s gracious gift of baptism incorporates and extends our lives into God’s mission. In contemporary worship experiences we have moved closer, as in marriage and same-sex blessings, to glimpsing and proclaiming the blessing of covenanting relationships.

Baptism is not simply or only an individual decision. As a covenant, this sacrament is about God acting and the community of faith responding. Therefore the service of Holy Baptism is more than a private family matter, and it is designed for public occasions. Even as baptism has been restored in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer to a joyous place of graceful prominence in Episcopal worship, so too blessing of same-sex relationships offers an opportunity for public expression of God’s abundant grace and goodness. Some same-sex couples, their family, friends, and other community members may experience restoration, healing, and forgiveness. Blessing services signal acceptance, affirmation, commitment, and ongoing support from God, from the Church, and from gathered family and friends. For those whose intimate relationships may have in the past been hidden, despised, shunned, ignored, or dismissed, the promise of new life in Christ is liberating. I am reminded of the freedom from cultural and social barriers promised by Paul in Galatians 3:27–28: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is now no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul envisioned baptism as overcoming all that separates human beings from one another and from God. God’s promise of freedom and shared life in Christ replaces all prior identities and divisions.

In my experience, the public character of blessing same-sex unions provides opportunities for pastoral witness and reconciliation. I remember experiencing with joyful tears a blessing service held for a couple who had been faithfully committed to one another for more than 50 years. They were described by others as “pillars of our congregation.” Over the years, their many gifts of service and stewardship had been welcomed, yet their loving, lifelong, committed relationship had not previously been even acknowledged, let alone blessed. For my homosexual sisters and brothers the public assurance of God’s presence and affirmation of their most intimate relationships has been a long time coming.

Anglican perspectives on committed intimate relationships have traditionally emphasized the loving relational character of matrimony. Early on in the Reformation our Episcopal ancestors were among the first modern Christians to put a loving spin on marriage. Thomas Cranmer, an Archbishop of Canterbury and the primary author of the earliest editions of the English Book of Common Prayer, crafted a liturgy which underscored marriage as a positive opportunity for mutual enjoyment. Cranmer — himself a happily, if quietly, married man with children — emphasized the benefit of marriage for England’s citizens. Marriage was, he said in the 1549 Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony, for the “mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.” Perhaps with his own “dearly beloved Margaret Cranmer” in mind, it was Cranmer who was the first to add to the official Church of England marriage text the promise that each partner would “love and cherish” the other. These words replaced the wife’s required oath in a late medieval service to be “buxom in bed and board.” Archbishop Cranmer’s perspective on committed loving relationships benefited the couple, the Church, and the wider society. In the shifting context of the English Reformation, Cranmer seized opportunities for significant liturgical, theological, and social change. These were expressed in the new English Book of Common Prayer. In worship and common prayer, cultural attitudes and expectations for married couples were shaped anew.

What I suggest here is that liturgical resources for blessing same-sex relationships have much in common with positive Anglican perspectives on loving and faithful relationships. Archbishop Cranmer recognized marriage as a vital social institution grounded in ideals of mutuality, help, and comfort. The trajectory from a

16<sup>th</sup>-century archbishop to an early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chief Justice of Massachusetts is slim at best. Yet it might be of interest to note that in the 2003 ruling that allowed Massachusetts to become the first state to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, Chief Justice Margaret Marshall argued that neither Church nor society should hoard the values bestowed in marriage or take their wider societal beneficial intent for granted.<sup>5</sup> Marshall, herself a practicing Episcopalian, argued that this ruling affirmed “the dignity and equality of all individuals.” Could it be that she was influenced by the Baptismal Covenant’s promise to “respect the dignity of every human being” (BCP, 305)? Could it be that common prayer has had a steadily progressive impact influencing both individual hearts and societal laws?

I am on firmer, far less conjectural, theological ground in naming Incarnational theology as a central aspect of Anglican theology. In Anglican theology the legacy of the Incarnation has become a cherished focal point, a guiding principle shaping Anglican understandings of human and divinity alike. Michael Ramsey, who many may remember as one of the great Archbishops of Canterbury of the 20th century, concluded that “the Incarnation meant not only that God took human flesh but that human nature was raised up to share in the life of God.”<sup>6</sup> The redemptive work of the Incarnation provides the foundation for Anglican optimism about humanity. This God not only creates but also restores the dignity of human nature. This God in Christ partakes of the fullness of human life. This God bears the full range of love’s power, including the capacity to instill and invite devotion, passion, affection, and sexuality expressed in our most intimate relationships. Biblical scholar and Anglican theologian L. William Countryman has noted that baptism interprets the goodness of the gifts bestowed by God in creation.<sup>7</sup> The blessing of covenanted couples, whether same-sex or different-sex partners, reminds us of the worth of intimate human relationships established by God in creation. In the blessing of covenanted couples and in marriage rites the goodness of faithful sexual intimacy is affirmed. Incarnational theology and baptismal theology alike proclaim that, in Jesus, God is with us in a new way. Similarly, in marriage, as in the blessing of covenanted couples, the newness of life in Christ is affirmed by both the couple and the wider community.

I have emphasized the theological grounding that the sacrament of Holy Baptism offers for other expressions of covenantal love. It might not be a stretch to recall and adapt a saying articulated 40 years ago when the Episcopal Church was debating the ordination of women: “If you are not going to ordain women, stop baptizing them.” Anglican theologian Marilyn McCord Adams commends this saying as “forwarding a strong doctrine of baptism.” She contends, as I do, that “the strong doctrine of baptism is radical and bears repeating.”<sup>8</sup> When considering the opportunity to bless covenanted same-sex couples, a similar baptismally grounded axiom might be: “If we are not open to blessing committed relationships of same-sex couples, we should stop baptizing them.” The covenant of baptism offers a lifelong foundation for deepening other covenanted relationships of love and service to God’s reconciling mission. Anglican Christians are known for finding integrity and coherence in the ways our patterns of worship shape our beliefs. As the theological resources in “I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing” indicate, promises affirmed by baptism shape an encouraging framework for blessing faithful relationships of covenanted love.

<sup>5</sup> The landmark ruling “Goodridge vs. the Department of Health,” was decided by the State Appellate Court in November of 2003 and became law in May of 2004. It has withstood attempts to replace the word “marriage” with less embracing matrimonial terminology like “civil unions.” In November of 2009, Episcopal Bishop M. Thomas Shaw, following a permissive (though not obligatory) action of General Convention for bishops in states which legally allow same-sex marriage, permitted clergy in the Diocese of Massachusetts to officiate at same-sex weddings.

<sup>6</sup> On the centrality of the Incarnation in Ramsey’s theology see Kenneth Leech, “‘The Real Archbishop’: A Profile of Michael Ramsey,” *The Christian Century* (March 12, 1986): 266–69.

<sup>7</sup> See L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing), especially chapter 5, 81-110.

<sup>8</sup> See Marilyn McCord Adams, “The Ordination of Women: Some Theological Implications,” in *Looking Forward, Looking Backward: Forty Years of Women’s Ordination*, ed. Fredrica Harris Thompsett (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 72–73.