

**Some Questions and Answers:
The Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant**

Prepared by the Bishop's Task Force on Marriage
The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Los Angeles

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An Introduction

The Bishop of Los Angeles is authorizing the use of a rite for the "Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant." This sacramental rite maybe used to bless the union of a man and a woman or it may be used to sacramentally unite persons of the same gender.

As this document is being written, the state of California has voted to ban same-sex marriage. While this ban may be reversed, we are writing this paper with the assumption that same-sex "marriage" is not legal in this state, and we do not intend to violate the current marriage laws. We present this document, not as a comprehensive theological treatise, nor as an official position paper of the Episcopal Church. It is written to provide some distinctions between marriage as a legal contract and the sacramental blessing of life-long covenants. It is also written in order to provide a biblical, historical and theological basis for this sacramental blessing especially as applied to a same-sex life-long covenant.

The document is presented in a question-answer format in which we are attempt to use some everyday language that may be able to help with the everyday questions that people who are sitting in our pews may be asking (or may have asked of them by friends from other faith traditions).

We also realize that this document may raise a host of questions with regard to the more encompassing issue of our position on "homosexuality" and how this phenomenon is understood within the biblical and historic tradition of our church. While some of the questions and answers we offer here may indirectly address issues of homosexuality, our purview here is limited to questions about the sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant which (as we have mentioned) may be applied to persons of the same gender.

Throughout this document we proceed from a fundamental reliance upon our core baptismal covenant: we are people committed to bringing about a just society and to respecting the dignity of every human being.

Question 1. What is the difference between "marriage" as recognized by the state and Holy Matrimony or a Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant?

Answer. Actually, there is a lot of cloudiness about the relationship between church and state when it comes to marriage. If these matters are confusing to you, you are certainly not alone.

In the first instance, marriage is a civil or legal contract. In most states (including California), in order to get married a couple must first obtain an official marriage license from the state. This document testifies that you are legally able to contract a marriage under the rules of the state, and it gives you permission to legally enter into marriage. All couples, regardless of what kind of marriage ceremony they will have, must first obtain this marriage license.

The ceremony for officially legalizing the marriage can then be conducted by any number of persons with any number of wedding ceremonies. It can be conducted by a judge or other person recognized by the state in a garden, a home, a judge's chambers. After some sort of public exchange of marriage vows, the officially designated officer of the state signs the license and testifies that the two are now legally married. With the signing of the license, the couple is legally married in the eyes of the state of California.

Now, here is where the church gets into it. In our country (which is not the case in many European countries), it is the custom that church weddings can also be *one of the ways in which a marriage can be legalized*. Thus at the end of the church ceremony, the clergy person (who is, in essence, an agent of the state here) signs the license testifying that vows were exchanged and with the signing of the license the couple is legally wed in the eyes of the state of California.

Now that California has banned persons of the same gender from being legally married, clergy of the church (as agents of the state) will no longer be able to perform a "legal" marriage for persons of the same sex.

However, when we get involved as a church, some additional content, far beyond the legal recognition of the union, gets put on the table. While it is true that the priest is acting as an agent of the state in performing a marriage, a priest is also an agent of the church, and a marriage ceremony in the church makes a theological statement and has spiritual significance.

Every time a priest officiates at a wedding he/she engages in a sacramental act. In essence every church marriage is a sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant. Thus, while persons of the same gender may not be "legally married" in the State of California, the church can (and in this instance "will") offer the sacramental and spiritual blessing to couples of the same gender.

Question 2. Can you explain what makes the "blessing of a life-long covenant" a sacrament?

Answer. Sacraments provide a doorway for helping us enter into the experience of God's holy presence. They provide us with a place where the divine and the human can intersect. In a sacrament we enter into an encounter with the living God. At a deep spiritual level, we meet the living resurrected Christ.

In the case of the sacramental blessing of life-long covenants, two people who have developed a committed relationship with one another come before God and the community of faith. They publicly vow and express their intention to live together in a lifelong covenantal relationship. This relationship is covenantal insofar as the two persons make promises to one another that they will support and nurture one another without condition.

When the two persons exchange their vows with one another, a sacrament is constituted, i.e. the two people exchanging vows are the ministers of the sacrament. The priest/officiant hears these vows and blesses the union in the name of God and on behalf of the church.

The kind of love which is celebrated in the blessing of this life-long committed covenantal relationship is God-like love: unconditional and persevering. When we witness the exchange of vows at such a blessing, we are invited into a glimpse of the circle of love of the couple being married. As we do so, we get a glimpse into the circle of God's own love. Our humanity meets divinity. In this way, the blessing of this covenant is indeed sacramental.

Question 3. How do the other sacraments fit into this picture??

Answer. Holy Baptism and the Eucharist are the *primary* sacraments of the church from which all the other sacramental rites flow, such as the Healing of the Sick, Confirmation, Ordination, Reconciliation, and Holy Matrimony/The Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant.

Question 4. Since Baptism is one of the primary sacraments, are there qualifications for someone to be baptized? And how does this relate to who may receive the other sacraments including the sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant?

Answer. There are no qualifications for Baptism. In fact, we make a rather bold statement about the amazing grace of Baptism when we baptize infants. Doing so demonstrates the fact that Baptism is primarily an unearned gift given to us by God. Baptism, first and foremost, is God's invitation into participation in God's life. God's invitation is extended to any who wish to accept.

While a period of preparation may sometimes be required before people are baptized (to help persons understand the nature of the sacrament and the promises involved) there are never any objective barriers which would prohibit someone from being baptized.

So, for example, we would not even think of denying baptism to a person on the basis of gender or sexual orientation, physical attributes, race, ethnic heritage, age, socio-economic status, intelligence level, or any other “label.” In this sense, there are no built-in qualifications or disqualifications for baptism. Any human being who desires to be baptized and is willing to enter into the covenant (either of his/her own accord or through the pledge of parents/sponsor) is welcome to be baptized.

Question 6. Traditionally, only a man and a woman could receive the church’s sacramental blessing for their union. Why is it possible for persons of the same gender to receive the same sacramental blessing?

Answer. Some of the previous conversation about Baptism and Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant helps us to formulate the first portion of this answer.

Since Baptism is the primary sacrament from which all other sacraments flow, it is logical to assume that the standards for admission to the sacrament of Baptism (the primary sacrament) should likewise apply to all other sacraments. With this in mind, no person should be disqualified from receiving any sacrament of the church on the basis of who they are or how they are created. As we mentioned above, If persons are not disqualified from baptism because of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and so on, neither should they be denied the other sacraments of the church.

Having said this, we also recognize that some sacraments, like ordination, might not be made *available* to some persons under particular circumstances. For example, after a period of discernment, a bishop or Commission on Ministry may refuse to ordain or recommend a person seeking the Sacrament of Holy Orders because it is believed that the person seeking ordination is doing so for personal gain (e.g. career advancement).

When it comes to the Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant/Holy Matrimony, a priest may also refuse to offer this sacrament to a couple because it is believed that the couple is incapable of entering into a relationship of lasting commitment as understood by our church.

However, these sacraments are never withheld because something basic to the very nature of the person has disqualified them, e.g., being a man, a woman, a gay person, a white person, a black person.

The second part of this answer with regard to same-sex couples being able to receive the sacramental blessing of the church focuses back upon our earlier definition about the nature of sacraments.

As noted earlier, the Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant involves the exchange of vows between two people who make a public declaration of unconditional, covenantal love. This God-type love draws us all into the experience of God.

It seems obvious that two men or two women are just as capable of making such a covenantal commitment of lifelong, God-like love as are a man and a woman. Hence, persons of the same gender are obviously able to engage in this sacramental action.

Question 7. Isn't the promise to have children necessary before a union may be sacramentally blessed by the church?

Answer. One can turn to page 423 in the prayer book and read the beginning of the traditional marriage ceremony where the purposes of Christian marriage are carefully articulated.

The notion that "bearing children" is a pre-requisite to the church's blessing will be quickly dispelled. The prayer book suggests that a holy union has three purposes: first, the mutual joy that a couple can provide for one another; secondly, so that the couple might help and comfort one another in prosperity and adversity; and finally, for "the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord *when it is God's will*" (italics added).

The church has traditionally offered the sacrament of Holy Matrimony to couples for whom the procreation of children was not even an option: for example, couples past child-bearing age, or couples in which one of the partners has a physical disability that precludes conceiving or bearing children. Moreover, couples may choose not to have children for a multitude of reasons.

Question 8. How can "procreation" be understood for same-sex couples?

Answer. If one looks at the tradition of the church over time, a widely accepted definition of "procreation" is cooperation with God in the creation of a new human person whose destiny is to share God's life forever. This definition of procreation is far broader than the actual physical conception and bearing of a child.

For example, a man and woman who adopt a child are certainly bringing the child into a new life in this world. As this man and woman raise this child in the knowledge and love of the Lord (as the prayer book directs) they nurture the child to share God's life forever. Although the child is not a physical product of their bodies, they are certainly *procreators* in every way in which procreation is understood.

If all of the above can be said of a man and woman who do not naturally conceive and bear a child from their own bodies, why cannot the exact same reasoning be applied to same-sex couples? Two men or two women might likewise adopt a child, nurture and guide the child in "the knowledge and love of the Lord" and nurture the child to share in "God's life forever." As such, they are procreating.

Question 9. If we offer the sacramental blessing for persons of the same gender, will we be abandoning our heritage and changing our biblical tradition?

Answer. We have to remember that, through the years, almost everything we understand about the marriage has changed and evolved. In fact, if we were to base our current understanding and practice of marriage upon Old Testament principles and practice, every man in the church would have a whole house full of wives to help carry on the family line.

Gradually, the custom of marriage between one man and one woman evolved and became prevalent in most of the Christian West. However, even in the context of monogamous marriage, the understanding of the purpose of marriage back in the time of our ancestors was certainly different from our current understanding.

Throughout antiquity, including Christian antiquity, marriage was primarily viewed as a social vehicle for uniting families for various political and social gains, from increasing the size of a farm or business to uniting nations. Women were basically commodities, who along with their dowry, were sold into a marital union, not only to assure for the passing on of lineage, but also to protect the woman from harm lest she be left to fend for herself in a society that demanded and expected the protection of a husband.

Furthermore, our ancestors placed great stock in the necessity of physically consummating a marriage. A couple was not “wed” until the marriage was physically consummated. Thus, the conception and bearing of children enjoyed primary significance and was an absolute necessity for Christian marriage in the past, again, to shore up the lineage and insure the continuation of the family.

The idea of marrying for love or the notion that marriage was a way for couples to express mutual joy was essentially a foreign concept in antiquity and not part of our Christian heritage. For *The Book of Common Prayer* to suggest that the primary purposes of marriage are “mutual joy” and “the help and comfort given to one another in prosperity and adversity” represents a serious and significant evolution from the ancient heritage and from the biblical tradition, and a relatively modern idea.

More recently, our views on divorce have changed dramatically. As recently as fifty years ago, divorce was reckoned to be a greater sin than, for example, staying in a violent marriage that exposed a spouse and children to a great risk of harm at the hands of the other spouse. Most Christians no longer believe that. Divorced persons are permitted remarriage in most churches.

So here is the point: as humanity and divinity have danced together over the ages, we have evolved in our experience of God and have come to newer understanding as to how best be faithful people and committed followers of Jesus. The biblical tradition from the Old Testament through the Christian era to our very own time is marked by evolution and emergence. Throughout our evolution, we do not change for the sake of change, but rather we change in order to be more faithful people and followers of Jesus.

When we are caught up in the “flow of God” we will always be moving in the direction of love. As such, our evolutions over time may be judged according to whether or not they have led us to greater and greater love – to the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor as one’s self.

Certainly, the notion of sacramentally blessing the covenant of persons of the same gender is a change from our historic heritage, and change is never easy. However, this is not an abandonment of our tradition, but rather an evolution and emergence from it.

Question 10. But even if we should and can sacramentally bless the covenant of persons of the same sex, shouldn’t we wait for someone in the “official church” to develop such a service?

Answer. We would certainly never advocate abandonment of *The Book of Common Prayer*. However, it is vital to regard it not as static and unmoving, but as a living document whose forms follow the prophetic movements of the church. For example, when women were first ordained, the words of the ordination rite were adapted to fit the needs of the occasion, and we did not say, “We need to wait until a new prayer book is printed!” At some point we decided that women were not, after all, unclean after giving birth and hence we no longer needed the service for the “Churching of Women after Childbirth.” We did not wait for a new prayer book before we abandoned that particular service. Trial liturgies have given us opportunities over the years to see whether we can find better ways of expressing through worship our relationship with God.

In the same way, we have developed a rite for sacramental blessings of life-long covenants. While not supplanting the prayer book liturgy of Holy Matrimony, it can be used for the blessing of same-sex couples or it could be used as an alternative to the traditional marriage rite found in the Book of Common Prayer.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this document, we mentioned that we had no intention of answering every possible question that may arise regarding the subject of the sacramental blessing of unions, especially as applied to the union of persons of the same sex. In fact, even our “answers” to these questions are not so much definitive answers as they are guidelines to help formulate ideas leading to further dialogue.

Perhaps, though, the best and most convincing way for individuals to move forward in their understanding about whether they can embrace same-gender sacramental blessings within the Christian tradition and in our own Episcopal Church is one which is far more “incarnational” and far less theological or rational.

So here is a final thought: if you want to discover whether or not the love of God can be experienced and expressed in a life long God-centered committed relationship between couples of the same-sex, have some conversation with people of the same gender who have been in lifelong committed relationships with each other.

Interact with these folks. Look at the fruit of their life together. Many of our churches are graced and gifted with the presence and ministry of such couples. Spend some time together. Share your stories with one another: go have dinner, get a cup of coffee or have a glass of wine together.

When we are able to see and interact with real loving people who share the same joys and the same struggles and are on the same journey of faith, theological questions and position-taking about the nature of “orthodox” faith often become irrelevant.

When we encounter the living God and meet the risen Christ in fellow human beings, we need no argument that they belong to Christ and that we all belong to God. And, when we know that we all belong to God, we have no longer need to debate over who deserves more or who deserves less because, belonging to God, everyone has been given everything. That is the nature of amazing grace.

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