

The Two Teachings on Marriage and the Canons that Govern Them

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Introduction

My purpose today is to provide as much clarity as possible to this Convention about the current situation in the Episcopal Church as it relates to same-sex marriage, the revision of the Book of Common Prayer, and the fact that this church has two teachings about the nature of marriage.

To begin, I think it's very helpful to remind ourselves just how dramatically the landscape on this question in the Episcopal Church has changed over the last 20 years, which is about when I was ordained. In 2003, the church was gearing up for a very protracted and rhetorically violent battle. The battle was both a political battle, in the sense that both sides were working to use to their advantage the canonical and synodical structures to move forward their agenda.

But it was also a theological battle that focused on three fundamental theological questions:

- a) What are the implications of the claim of both Genesis and Jesus himself that human beings are created male and female in the image of God?
- b) What types of sexual activity contribute to our flourishing as human beings who are called to glorify God in our bodies, and what are the proper contexts in which those actions can take place?
- c) What is Christian marriage? Is it the five-stranded cord of
 1. Male and female
 2. Freely and without coercion, that is
 3. Exclusive,
 4. Life-long, and
 5. Open to the procreation of children

Or is marriage something related but distinct from this?

Starting in 2018, the General Convention has formally introduced three theological changes into the Episcopal Church with respect to marriage.

First, the Episcopal Church has also introduced a major modification to its anthropology—to its answer about the implications of being created male and female in the image of God.

Second, this church has also modified its approach to sexual ethics, permitting certain sexual acts and calling them holy that up to this point had been far been outside the bounds of Christian holiness.

And Third, this church has introduced a new definition of marriage. This new definition of marriage, like traditional marriage, is undertaken freely and without coercion; it is also Exclusive and, Life-long. But it makes two major changes to the traditional doctrine:

- It is between any two adults, not just a man and a woman, and
- The relationship is no longer necessary open to the procreation of children, since same-sex couples cannot naturally procreate together.

It is important to state that those who cannot accept these innovations believe that neither the whole Church of Christ, not one tiny portion of it, has the authority, to make such changes. That is because they are convicted that these are all matters of revelation given in Scripture: the nature of male and female; the proper ordering of our bodies for holiness, and the nature of marriage and its sacramental expression. The church simply cannot legislate things that contradict what ordinands declare to be “the Word of God and to contain all things necessary for salvation.”

Two Teachings

But...there is an enormous caveat. The Episcopal Church could have decided to change its anthropology, its sexual ethics, and its definition of marriage and the sacrament itself, full stop.

But that is NOT what this church has done. For most of the time that we’ve been debating these questions, the General Convention resolutions around all these matters have also maintained (and I’m quoting here)

the indispensable place that the minority who hold to this Church’s historic teaching on marriage have in our common life, whose witness our Church needs.”

It’s important to pause here. This is a rather extraordinary claim, as is the use of the word “teaching”. The Episcopal Church has chosen a path where it has two teachings on marriage, both of which are permissible, but which contradict each other at several quite substantive moments. In short, we have two doctrines of marriage.

The approach to marriage by the Episcopal Church is, in fact, practically identical to how the Church of England handled the development of the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopacy (women were only permitted to be ordained as bishops in 2014). The Church of England issued what they called “The Five Guiding Principles” which set out the basis for what they called “mutual flourishing” for people with both theological convictions.¹ While the Episcopal Church did not issue a document like this, for all intents and purposes it has basically followed the approach of The Five Guiding Principles and applied them to the question of marriage.

So, as a way to think about the Episcopal Church’s decision to permit same-sex marriage through the lens of the structural and ecclesiological approach of the Church of England and ordination, I’d taken the Five Guiding Principles and adapted them to the marriage debate (these are included in your handout but I won’t take the time to read them now):

1. Now that legislation has been passed to enable same-sex couples to marry and have their relationships formally blessed, the Episcopal Church is fully committed to allow marriage to be open to two persons, without reference to gender;
2. Anyone who ministers within the Episcopal Church must acknowledge that the Episcopal Church has reached a clear decision on the matter;

¹ https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/the_five_guiding_principles.pdf. Accessed October 11, 2025.

3. Because of the indispensable place that the minority who hold to this Church's historic teaching on marriage have in our common life, whose witness our Church needs, the Episcopal Church acknowledges that its own clear decision on marriage is set within a broader process of discernment within the Anglican Communion and the whole Church of God;
4. Since those within the Episcopal Church who, on grounds of theological conviction, maintain that marriage can only be between a man and a woman continue to be within the spectrum of teaching and tradition of the Anglican Communion and the wider Christian catholic, the Episcopal Church remains committed to enabling those committed to the traditional teaching to flourish within its life and structures; and
5. Pastoral and canonical provision for the minority within the Episcopal Church will be made without specifying a limit of time and in a way that maintains the highest possible degree of communion and contributes to mutual flourishing across the whole of the Episcopal Church.

On the one hand, we can say is that the Episcopal Church has decided to take a particular path of maintaining the spirit of unity in the body of peace (Eph 4:3).

On the other hand, we must also say that this church has decided to permit a situation that is less than ideal, at best: We have decided to sit with a situation where two teachings, two doctrines of marriage that directly contradict each other at several fundamental places. As far as we can tell, these two doctrines are going to be permitted at the same time and indefinitely.

Transition

This is a 30,000-foot view of the new state of play.

I think it will be helpful to look at the details of what has changed canonically and liturgically.

The Details

First, The Episcopal Church has taken legal steps to permit same sex marriage. This has happened in several ways:

- The General Convention has continued to authorize a rite called "[The Witness and Blessing of a Marriage](#)" (2024-D035), which is a gender neutral marriage liturgy not subject to the permission of a bishop.
- The General Convention also passed a resolution to authorize for Trial Use a different [gender-neutral marriage liturgy](#) as well as the another form of the Blessing of a Civil Marriage and an Order for Marriage, proposing that it be included in the Book of Common Prayer (2024-A116). A corresponding resolution also proposed a first reading to revise the Catechism at the back of the Book of Common Prayer to remove any mention of male and female in the section on Holy Matrimony (2024-A160). This will come to the 2027 General Convention for a second reading. If passed (which is all but certain), those three rites will be added to the Book of Common Prayer and the Catechism revised in 2027.

That is the first major change.

The Second major change took place in 2018 through a key piece of legislation known as [B012](#) ([see the TLC story on B012 from 2018](#)). What this legislation did was to strip bishops of their authority to decide whether same-sex marriage can take place in their diocese. Instead (and I'm quoting the resolution), "provision will be made for all couples desiring to use these marriage liturgies in their local congregation or worshipping community, provided that nothing in this Resolve narrows the authority of the Rector or Priest-in-Charge."

In other words, the decision whether the new doctrine of marriage would be expressed in particular parishes was not up to the bishop, but to the Rector. (From the perspective of ecclesiology, we could say that in this instance, we have substituted episcopal governance of bishop for the presbyterian governance of priests).

It's also helpful to remember a long-standing canon that reads: "It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize or bless any marriage" (Canon I.18.7).

In short, bishops cannot determine whether same-sex marriage happens in their diocese. Instead, Rectors determine whether such rites will be used in their particular parish.

The Third major change took place in 2024, when certain legal protections were added to the canons to protect those who hold to either teaching on marriage:

- The first of those concerns access to ordination and deployment ([Resolution A092](#)): "No person shall be denied access to the discernment process or to any process for the employment, licensing, calling, or deployment for any ministry, lay or ordained." The same goes for licensure or canonical residency for any cleric.²

Keep in mind that this change cuts in both directions. It limits the authority of bishops who remain convinced that marriage is only between a man and a woman such that one's belief about marriage cannot be the basis for the denial of access to "the discernment process or to any process for the employment, licensing, calling, or deployment for any ministry." But it also

² [Resolution A092](#), Access to ordination and deployment

This resolution adds the following sections to [Canon III.1](#):

Sec 3. No person shall be denied access to the discernment process or to any process for the employment, licensing, calling, or deployment for any ministry, lay or ordained, in this Church because of their conscientiously-held theological belief that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, or that marriage is a covenant between two people. No right to employment, licensing, ordination, call, deployment, or election is hereby established. In dioceses where the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority (or, where applicable, ecclesiastical supervision) is unable, for reasons of conscientiously-held theological belief, to ordain a person who holds one of the above-named theological beliefs, the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority (or ecclesiastical supervision) shall invite another bishop of this Church to provide access to the discernment process for ordination.

Sec. 4. No priest or deacon shall be denied licensure or canonical residence in any diocese of this Church because of their conscientiously-held theological belief that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, or that marriage is a covenant between two persons. No right to canonical residence or licensing is hereby established.

means that a bishop with an expansive view of marriage cannot discriminate against someone who holds a traditional view of marriage, including in consents after an episcopal election.

- The second set of canonical protections specifically concerns bishops who hold a traditional understanding of marriage (Resolution [A093](#), Add provisions of 2018-B012 to canons). In short, when a parish and a couple wish to make use of rites for same-sex marriage, a bishop with a traditional doctrine of marriage “will invite another bishop of this Church to provide pastoral support to the couple, the Member of the Clergy involved and the congregation or other community of faith.”³

There are two important things about this canonical protection for bishops to keep in mind:

First, there are basically two ways that these new canons about marriage can be implemented by traditional bishop.

- One approach would be through Delegated Episcopal Oversight (DEPO), in which the diocesan bishop gives over the pastoral authority of the parish to another bishop. This has been the approach of Bishop Sumner since 2018 in this diocese.
- The other approach would be much more limited, the approach that Bishop Bauerschmidt took in the Diocese of Tennessee: the diocesan bishop would only hand over authority to another bishop *with respect to all marriage or just to same-sex marriages, but in no other area*.

The second thing to remember about this provision is what is being said theologically about the authority of the diocesan bishop. The requirement that a bishop with a traditional view will delegate pastoral oversight to another bishop is premised on a series of theological (specifically, ecclesiological) assumptions:

- a. The bishop is the chief pastor of the local church, called the diocese (BCP 513). The fulness of this ministry is gathered up in the term “the high priesthood” (“and exercise without reproach the high priesthood to which you have called *him*”) which expresses the quite ancient teaching that the bishops contain the fulness of Holy Orders by divine gift. What this means is that every celebration of the sacraments is a direct extension of the ministry of the diocesan bishop.

³ [Resolution A093](#), Add provisions of 2018-B012 to canons

Added to [Canon 1.19.3](#), is the following:

Bishops exercising ecclesiastical authority, or where appropriate ecclesiastical supervision, who hold a theological position that does not embrace marriage for same-sex couples, will in the case of remarriage after divorce invite another bishop of this Church to oversee the consent process and to receive any report of such Marriages, as provided in subsection c.

[Canon III.12.3.a](#) was also amended to add a new subsection that reads:

In dioceses where the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority (or, where applicable, ecclesiastical supervision) holds a theological position that does not embrace marriage for same-sex couples, and there is a desire to use such rites by same-sex couples in a congregation or other community of faith, the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority (or ecclesiastical supervision) will invite another bishop of this Church to provide pastoral support to the couple, the Member of the Clergy involved and the congregation or other community of faith.

- b. By requiring bishops with a traditional view of marriage to delegate pastoral authority for same-sex marriages to another bishop, our canons are making explicit the theology that clearly undergirds the ordination rite for a bishop: it would be not just improper, but a pastoral and theological contradiction, for a bishop with a traditional view of marriage to exercise pastoral authority over a rite which he or she believes expresses a wrong or erroneous teaching.

So, while the Episcopal Church has introduced a second theology of marriage and made same-sex marriage rites available everywhere it is legal, it has ALSO made several concessions for any clergy who are unable to accept these developments:

- First, this long-standing provision remains unchanged: “It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize or bless any marriage” ([Canon I.18.7](#)).
- Second, one’s view on marriage can never be a factor in “the discernment process or to any process for the employment, licensing, calling, or deployment for any ministry” ([Canon III.1.3-4](#)), including consents for bishops.
- And Third, the requirement that bishops with a traditional view of marriage delegate pastoral oversight of same-sex weddings (including permission after a divorce for remarriage) to another bishop ([Canon 1.19.3](#) and [Canon III.12.3.a](#)).

To put a **fine** point on it, this means that any lay person, cleric, parish, bishop, or diocese is completely within its theological and canonical rights to publicly maintain the traditional theology of marriage that is expressed in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

The 2027 Prayer Book

This gets to the final question that I’m guessing many of you are asking: what happens after 2027? Do we have to replace the prayer books in our pews in the 2027 book?

The short answer is: No. [Resolution 2018-A068](#) memorialized the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, in large part because of the impending addition of the new marriage rites to the prayer book and thus to assure the minority that it will continue to have access to the 1979 book as it now stands. Since this term “memorialization” is a bit unclear, the 2024 General Convention, in a revision of the canons related to liturgical authorizations, clarified, “Any Book of Common Prayer, or portions thereof, memorialized by the General Convention, is authorized for use at any service in all the Dioceses and other jurisdictions of this Church” ([2024-B008](#)).

Thus, regardless of whether the prayer book after 2027 ends up being called the 2027 Prayer Book or not, the current version of the 1979 prayer book can continue to be used, and no parish will be required to switch out the books in the pews.

Conclusion

This is the approach that the Episcopal Church has taken with respect to marriage.

- We have decided to sit with a situation where two teachings, two doctrines of marriage that directly contradict each other at several fundamental places. As far as we can tell, these two doctrines are going to be permitted at the same time and indefinitely.

- Even while it has done this, the Episcopal Church ALSO made several concessions for any clergy who are unable to accept these developments by protecting both integrities when it comes to employment, licensing, calling, or deployment for any ministry” (Canon III.1.3-4), including consents for bishops, and requires bishops with a traditional view of marriage to delegate pastoral oversight of same-sex weddings to another bishop.
- Finally, even after gender-neutral marriage is added to the Book of Common Prayer, the 1979 Prayer Book remains available and authorized throughout the Episcopal Church.

Thank you again to Bishops Sumner and Price for this invitation and I hope this has been helpful for all of you.