



TEC Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music
Addressing General Convention Resolution C056, *Liturgies for Blessing*

Christian Life and Covenants

Theological Reflection on the Blessing of Same-Gender Unions

Introduction

General Convention Resolution C056 called for, in part, the collection and development of theological resources for the blessing of same-gender unions. The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music created a Theological Resources Task Group (TRTG) to address that aspect of the resolution. The TRTG then drafted the following theological reflection. While the following is meant to guide the Commission in its work concerning same-gender unions in particular, the TRTG believes that this kind of theological reflection would apply much more broadly to a variety of covenantal relationships. The TRTG hopes this work will thus further renew the Church's theological reflection on all forms of committed, covenantal relationships, including marriage.

I. Baptismal Grounding

The Christian life is rooted in the sacrament of baptism, an effective sign of our participation in God's mission in the world and a reminder of our hope for the fulfillment of all things in God. Every covenant and commitment we make as Christians offers an opportunity to live out the affirmations and promises of baptism. Reflecting on same-gender unions as covenants, and thus evoking the Baptismal Covenant, suggests three key theological touchstones in Christian traditions regarding the significance of covenants more generally:

1. Covenantal relationships exhibit a *sacramental* character, which makes God's presence and divine grace visible;
2. Covenantal relationships participate in the *Trinitarian* life of God as persons in covenant with each other reflect (though certainly in finite, imperfect ways) the dynamic mutuality and self-giving of the Holy Trinity;
3. Covenantal relationships renew an *eschatological* vision in Christian life as the desire that leads us to commit ourselves to another person reflects the hope for union with God.

Taken together, these three baptismal touchstones can recall the overarching Biblical narrative traced from creation and fall through covenant, redemption, and fulfillment. The covenants we make, in other words, carry the potential to reflect God's own covenantal relationship with God's creation, which is particularly manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

II. Theological Reflection on Covenant-Making

An important way of living out the baptismal covenant is through the making of "households," which can of course include a wide range of relationships (couples, friends, extended families, religious communities, and so on). God calls people into this kind of covenantal life a divine vocation. Like any other vocation, covenantal relationship requires intentional commitment to spiritual discipline. Moreover, households can become an important location for training ourselves in the love of neighbor, receiving divine grace, and practicing reconciliation and forgiveness.

A particularly fruitful avenue for theological reflection would invite explicit links between the household called “Church” and the more particular households created through our covenant-making with others. Those links can be made in at least two important ways.

First, the Eucharistic table around which the baptized gather becomes a location for recalling all the other tables around which we gather in our various households. The four-fold movement of the Eucharist (take, bless, break, give) suggests a way to reflect on how we offer our covenantal relationships to God, who then *takes* our offering, *blesses* it, *breaks* us open, and *gives* us to the world for ministry and service.

Second, the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection offers a model for our household relationships of dying to sin and being reborn to new life. The giving of ourselves to covenantal relationship belongs to the lifelong process of conversion, of taking on the “mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:1-5), as we live no longer for ourselves alone but for the sake of the Gospel (Mark 8:35). The Paschal Mystery thus reminds us that covenantal relationships are not an end in themselves. Instead, and just like the Baptismal Covenant, our relationships can offer a glimpse and a foretaste of union with God at the heavenly banquet.

These rich theological themes, rooted in Baptism, Eucharist, and the Paschal Mystery, offer ways for the Church to reflect on how committed relationships become a blessing for the wider faith community. Covenantal relationships bear witness to the good news of the Gospel, not least by enabling those engaged in such relationships to manifest the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) in ways that they might not otherwise have done apart from the relationship. Discerning the gifts of the Spirit in a relationship is one reason why a faith community offers a blessing for that relationship; it is also why the relationship in turn becomes a blessing to the community.

These then, in brief, are the key theological principles informing the work of the task groups in relation to General Convention resolution C056:

- *Vocation*: God calls people into long-term committed relationships as a vocation;
- *Covenant-making*: Loving faithfulness can participate in and reflect God’s own covenantal commitment to God’s creation;
- *Households*: Covenants create households as “schools of virtue” for life-long formation in spiritual discipline nurtured by divine grace;
- *Fruitfulness*: Faithful love in relationship enables the offering of countless gifts to the wider community that would not be possible in the same way apart from that relationship, including: lives of service, compassion, generosity, and hospitality;
- *Mutual Blessing*: The liturgical blessing of a covenantal relationship acknowledges the fruits of the Spirit in that relationship and in turn becomes a blessing to the faith community, strengthening the community for its mission and ministry in the world.

In sum, covenantal relationships are one way for Christians to live out their baptismal calling in the world. As the Church discerns the fruits of the Spirit in faithful commitments – such as households marked by compassion, generosity, and hospitality – these commitments become a blessing to the wider community. Blessing covenantal relationships, including same-gender unions, thus belongs to the mission of the Church in its ongoing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christian hope of union with God.

III. Draft Outline of Theological Resources

Based on the theological *principles* drafted thus far, the TRTG is proposing to craft several essays in response to the resolution’s call for theological *resources*. The following is an outline of those resources, which the TRTG hopes will prove useful not only for the blessing of same-gender relationships but also for deeper theological reflection on all forms of covenantal relationship throughout the Church.

Faith, Hope, and Love: Theological Resources for the Blessing of Same-Gender Unions

Introduction and Executive Summary

The introduction will articulate the method for theological reflection employed by the task group in assembling these resources, including: how to read and interpret Scripture; how the Church discerns the presence of God today and in conversation with historical traditions; how Christian communities remain in communion with each other even when we find ourselves disagreeing on some matters. The executive summary will offer an overview of the theological reflection informing this work: it is *faithful* to the Gospel as this is expressed in baptism; it manifests the Christian *hope* for union with God; and it is rooted most of all in *love* – the love expressed in human covenants as this reflects the love of God for the world, which the Church is called to serve.

A. Christian Life and Covenants

This essay will expand on the outline and narrative treatment of the theological principles in the first two sections of this present document noted above.

B. The Church's Work: A Theology of Blessing

The Church's work of prayer and worship includes various forms of blessing. This essay will articulate a theological approach to liturgical blessing by considering what a blessing actually is and what it "does," as well as how the Church discerns when a blessing is appropriate. The meaning of a blessing is at least two-fold: 1) it gives voice to where God's people have already discerned God's active presence; and 2) it acknowledges the ongoing need for divine grace.

C. The Church's Calling: A Focus on Mission

The Church's liturgical life of common prayer and worship is not for the Church alone but for the world, which God has called the Church to serve. This essay will place Resolution C056 within that wider context of the Church's mission and ministry, not only for same-gender couples and their families, but also for the wider society. All covenantal relationships, rooted in the Baptismal Covenant, play a role in proclaiming Christian hope and the good news of the Gospel.

Appendix A: Biblical Quandaries and Christian Unity

Resolution C056 acknowledges the differences of opinion within the Episcopal Church concerning the interpretation of Scripture and same-gender relationships. This appendix will provide an overview of the biblical scholarship on that topic that has stretched over many decades. It will also outline the variety of approaches to biblical interpretation, proposing ways for the Church to move forward together without necessarily agreeing on just one such approach.

Appendix B: For Further Reading and Study

A great deal of material has already been written on the theology, ethics, and spirituality of same-gender relationships. This appendix will provide an annotated list of just some of those resources that the TRTG believes would be most helpful for those who wish to do further reading and study on these topics.