What does blessing bless?

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If agitation for and against liturgies for same-gender couples brings no other benefit, it will have served to stimulate serious theological reinvestigation of liturgical rites such as matrimony–what they are, what they mean, and what they do. My purpose in this article is not to take a stand, one way or the other, on the propriety of ceremonial events of the kind that has been the center of so much dispute. It is to address the more general question I have used as my title. In some sense, however, the way I have posed the question does take its bearings from the fact that the name for these events that seems to be favored in church circles at present is "blessing"; hence the slogan, "Claiming the Blessing," adopted by a consortium of groups that hope to influence the Episcopal Church's General Convention. The rites advocated may not be marriage ceremonies, but the advocates evidently hold that they are *like* marriage ceremonies inasmuch as both are ceremonies of blessing–blessings, for short.

Blessings, then, of what?

Perhaps the most straightforward answer is that blessing blesses a relationship. I have seen a service leaflet headed "The Celebration and Blessing of the Relationship of A. B. and C. D.," obviously modeled (as was the shape of the service itself) on The Book of Common Prayer, where the "Solemnization of Matrimony," as it used to be called, is now "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage." The reasoning appears to be this: marriage is a relationship of two people, husband and wife. The corresponding relationship between two men or two women has no proper name, but it is anyhow a *relationship,* on which a blessing can therefore be bestowed or invoked, just as it can on the relationship called marriage.

Now the idea that a wedding is the blessing of a relationship is unobjectionable, as far as it goes, precisely because it does not go very far. "Relationship" by itself tells us almost nothing. Human beings form and leave relationships of vastly different kinds. What is it, exactly, that constitutes *this* relationship? Traditional theologies of matrimony have this much to be said for them: they give concrete answers, though not always the same answer. Explanations of the "nuptial blessing" in particular have varied somewhat. According to one theory, this blessing blesses the bride, and specifically her fertility. The clergy were instructed accordingly: no blessing is to be given at the second marriage of a widow or the marriage of a woman past the age of childbearing.

Today it would be hard to find anyone who follows such instructions, although they can be found in Anglican manuals not long out of print. Quite the contrary. The blessing of a marriage is widely understood in a way that inverts the theology which the instructions apply. For that theology, blessing is prospective: it concerns something that (God willing) is going to happen. The more recent notion I have in mind would have it that blessing is retrospective: it concerns something that has already happened. This notion, I am convinced, is mistaken. But I have found it helpful in clarifying, by contrast, my own opinion of what blessing blesses, and so I propose to elaborate it here, as fairly as I can, in order to uncover its theological presuppositions. From there I will go on to offer an alternative.

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By way of introducing the theology of blessing I am going to examine, I will report an argument that brings it to bear on a practical matter, as I heard it delivered at a meeting of supervisors and instructors in my diocese's training program for the vocational (permanent) diaconate. The topic under discussion was a seemingly unrelated liturgical question: whether to allow deacons-in-training, not yet ordained, to take the deacon's role at the eucharist when it is celebrated, say, in their field-education parishes. May they prepare the altar, read the gospel, say the dismissal and so on? Yes, someone urged, they may. In fact, they *should*. Why? Because there is an analogy between holy orders and holy matrimony, such that the meaning and function of the ordination and marriage rites are analogous too. The point of this analogy was explained as follows.

Everyone knows (so the argument went) that when a man and a woman come to church for their wedding they have already been living together in physical intimacy as husband and wife. That is what *makes* them husband and wife. The ceremony in church acknowledges this. It ratifies and celebrates the fact that there now exists a particular instance of the institution, the practice, of marriage. The institution has been brought *into* existence by the "marriage act" which the two parties have been performing. At the wedding, the church puts a seal of approval–its blessing–on the couple as already coupled. By the same token, the church's blessing of a candidate for holy orders at the laying-on of hands puts an *imprimatur* on another social fact–the set of practices that relate a deacon to laity, presbyters, bishop, church and world. And what brings that fact into existence, similarly, is performing what might be called the "deacon act," the *leitourgia* that constitutes *diakonia,* namely preparing the altar, reading the gospel and so on. That is not all there is to *diakonia,* any more than sex is all there is to marriage. Nevertheless we, the church, should presume and expect that those who are being ordained to the diaconate will already be *being* deacons in this primordial way, just as we presume and expect that couples who are being married are already being spouses in the primordial sense.

Such was the argument. It draws a practical conclusion about liturgical policy from an analogy that rests on a certain understanding of two "sacramental" acts of blessing. I put "sacramental" in quotation marks so as to leave it undecided whether holy matrimony and holy orders are to be ranked as true and proper sacraments, on a par with holy baptism and the holy eucharist. The decision rests on how a sacrament, properly so called, is defined, and at that point Anglicans tend to become studiously reticent. Notice, however, that the argument I have just summarized implies that matrimony and orders are *not* sacraments by at least one standard definition. They are not "*effectual* signs." They do not begin anything or change anything; they provide occasions to rejoice in what, of themselves, they only register–the fact that certain persons are deacons or spouses, as the case may be.

What makes these occasions holy, then? The answer would seem to be: the sacredness of what already *is*. To put this in somewhat more theological terms, we might draw a further analogy. A marriage or an ordination, on the view I am discussing, is like a service of thanksgiving for harvest. God brings forth the fruits of the earth in their seasons; when that has happened, we return thanks. Likewise, God from time to time raises up ministries and marital relationships; when that happens, we give thanks too. What God "does," in other words, is what takes place in the ordinary, "natural" course of things. Sacredness is there to be found, and when found, celebrated. We bless what is already blessèd. In a word, the theology that underlies this view of ritual blessing is a theology of creation, and that is in fact how many of those who adopt the view understand it. When the created order of things becomes transparent, as it were, so as to disclose its inherent holiness, the church gives public, communal expression to the disclosure. That is what blessing blesses.

I have analyzed what I take to be the theological presuppositions involved in drawing a certain kind of analogy between ordination and marriage. In themselves, they are admirable presuppositions to adopt. The holiness of creation does call for celebration. However admirable, though, these presuppositions are inadequate. Christian sacramental practice cannot be explained on the basis of creation alone. The most important reason why it cannot is that to make the doctrine of creation central tends to make *history* peripheral. By history I mean, not simply the sum of all events in time, but, more specifically, what happens in time insofar as human beings decide it is going to happen and choose to make it happen. I mean the ongoing, open-ended process that takes its direction from the more or less intelligent, reasonable, responsible, deliberate acts of women and men. The analogy between marriage and ministry I have discussed, and the sacramental theology it is bound up with, leave out history in this sense inasmuch as they leave out newness, purpose, expectation, hope, intention and commitment. They have no orientation to the *future*. Absent that orientation, weddings and ordinations can only be construed in the way the analogy does construe them–as endings, not beginnings, as conclusions, not initiations, as sacred counterparts to secular events like graduating from high school, not like commissioning an officer or inaugurating a president.

It might seem that there is nothing here to object to in principle. After all, the Christian church is certainly in the business of celebrating accomplished facts, chiefly "the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ," to quote the General Thanksgiving. But just as certainly, that is not all there is to Christianity. The same prayer goes on to bless God for "the hope of glory," by which it presumably means the glory with which Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. That is to say, Christianity is *eschatological*. Whatever else that very slippery word means, it means that while Christians do affirm and celebrate what has happened and what does happen, they continue to look towards what is to be.

The redemption of the world is achieved "already," *and* it is "not yet" accomplished. History is not over. It is going somewhere it has not been.

Whether and in what sense eschatology is essential to Christianness can of course be debated. At present the debate is especially lively among scholars of Christian origins. As a theologian I can only note that there is no way for theology to be "somewhat" eschatological. It is a case of "in for a penny, in for a pound." If Christians have their Christian identity in what is yet to be, all their theological reflection has to take that into account, not least their ecclesiology. One implication is that the church does not exist only to praise God for creation, or even for the "mighty acts" God has done in the past. It does exist for that. Also, however, and centrally, it exists to be the thing that God is doing "in these last days," and to become the thing that God will be doing until the eschaton. For it is the church's claim–in some sense its *only* claim–that it knows what "the thing that God is doing" consists in.

Archbishop Rowan Williams has articulated what this "thing" is in an article on–significantly–liturgical worship. The characteristic form of God's "doing," the archbishop writes, is the formation of community: the formation of Israel, the formation of the church. God's eschatological "thing" is the ordering of common life in such a way as to manifest not just the inherent goodness of creation but the pattern of *new* creation, *re*-creation, through healing and restoring and forgiveness.[1] The entry of humans into community which anticipates the kingdom that is coming is the effectual sign of the "new covenant of reconciliation" established in the paschal mystery, which is the eschatological event *par excellence*. For the church to be its eschatological self is for the church to be what God intends the human race to become.

Let us return now to the original question. Has an orientation to the "eschatological" future any bearing on how the church's practice of liturgical blessing is best conceived? It has. Consider the scripts for the two dramas enacted in the services of ordination and marriage. In the light of what I have said so far, one feature common to both these liturgical performances stands out very clearly. Each has a climax, a turning point. The action pivots on one act, which begins when the church, in the person of the presiding minister, asks certain of its members whether they will be and do something rather than anything else–not whether they *are* this already, not whether they *have* done this, but whether they *will* this, whether they are *willing* to be this and do this. To specify "this" in prayer book words: Will you be loyal to doctrine, discipline, and worship? Will you obey your bishop? Will you be faithful in prayer and the reading of scripture? Will you love, comfort, honor and keep, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, be faithful? Will you, in sum, set yourself on the way to a certain kind of future? Will you make it *be* this kind of future? Will you define, in terms of these practices, these obligations, these expectations, what you are going to become?

Such questions ask for the answer "I will," which seems to be a statement of fact. So it is; but the fact it states is a future fact, a fact that begins to be when "I will" is spoken. The questions at a wedding or an ordination invite a *promise*. To respond "I will" is to perform what has been termed a speech-act, an utterance that actualizes and makes real what it speaks about. Otherwise stated, it effects what it signifies–the definition of a sacrament mentioned above. It is no accident that the very word *sacramentum* had as one of its meanings a pledge, an oath, a solemn vow.

The direction my discussion is taking is probably plain. An analogy does hold between matrimony and ordination. What we bless in both these rites is the same thing. But the analogy does not lie where the view I discussed earlier tries to find it. What we bless is not an existing state of affairs. We bless an act, a set of promisings. The making of these promises may take place at the end of a preparatory past. It commonly follows courtship or formation or engagement or professional training. But it does not follow inevitably, and when it does it is not just an extension of what has preceded it. Something new begins. If we ask why the church should take notice of this beginning, and bless these promises in particular, the reason is that brides and bridegrooms and ordinands are promising to order their living so as to promote and embody new creation. To keep these promises is to determine the indeterminate future in a way that brings closer the "eschatological" community that is coming, the community for which God made the world and that God is making for the world.

That is my answer to the question of what liturgical or sacramental blessing blesses. It blesses a future-in-the-making. It blesses an incipient history, a change in human self-constitution, a willing and choosing of life ordered to a common end. It blesses vows. There is a good deal that my answer leaves unanswered, and my argument needs more detail than I can provide here. But four points that expand it can be mentioned by way of conclusion.

In the first place, although I have concentrated on only two rites, and those two "occasional services" only, the position I have outlined can be generalized. Blessing "eschatological" promises that regard a certain kind of future–that, I would hold, is what all blessing most essentially is. Incense or pets or buildings or vestments or palm branches can be blessed, no doubt. In some communities they are. But these are secondary blessings or subliturgies. They have their meaning and their function within the Christian way of life in relation to the "sacramental" blessing of human commitment and self-determination that builds up healing, reconciling, forgiving community.

In the second place, although I have said that blessing ordination vows or wedding vows is blessing in the full and proper sense, it does not follow that these are the promises which define Christian living, much less that the church's primary mission is to get people married or ordained. Marriage and ordained ministry are special vocations. To be a spouse or a cleric is to be a certain *sort* of Chris-

tian, by particularizing the future that baptism inaugurates. It is the baptismal promises that constitute the church's fundamental order of ministry and define its "eschatological" character.

In the third place, if baptism is *the* sacrament of Christian community, whereas marriage and ordination regard roles and institutions and practices internal to that community, it would follow that it is for the church to determine which *other* sub-orderings of its common life, and thus what other kinds of promises, it will sanction and celebrate and bless. It is, at least, pretty clear that this is what the church has always done. Not until some time in the middle ages did western Christianity embrace what had been until then a matter of secular custom and civil law, namely marriage as it was understood and practiced at that time. Later, following a lapse of some three hundred years, the Church of England decided that it would once again bless the promises made by monks and nuns, and celebrate as one of its special vocations the common life of a monastic household. Another hundred years or so, and we find the Episcopal Church adding to its prayer book an office that blesses yet another kind of community, the one established by adopting a child.

The service for adoption confirms one part of the argument I have presented, by making the point that motherhood and fatherhood are *historical* relationships in the sense I used earlier. They come to be, that is, because persons deliberately bring them into being, with or without–and in this case without–an already-existing "natural" fact of biology. Thus the presider is instructed to ask the candidate much the same question as in matrimony: do you take this woman to be your mother, this man to be your father? And there is confirmation of another part of my argument in another service new to the current prayer book, the "Blessing of a Civil Marriage." Here the significant point is that the couple whose promises are to be blessed are already husband and wife, and are so named. Nevertheless, they are asked to make exactly the same promises as a bride and bridegroom would be asked to make. The implication is that what matters to the church is willingness to take on a special Christian vocation, not status in civil law–or, to extend the implication a bit, status in common law either. Recall that the argument I began by criticizing takes it for granted that weddings in church are, in effect, blessings of common-law marriages.

In the fourth and final place, I said at the outset that I have no stand to take on whether there should be an officially recognized service for couples of the same gender. But if my argument is sound it does single out the question on which such a decision ought to turn. What the Christian community needs to ask is whether two men or two women can make a set of promises such as would define a vocation which that community can recognize as "eschatological" in the sense I have discussed–promises which it might, therefore, bless.

Note

[1] See Rowan D. Williams, "Imagining the Kingdom: Some questions for Anglican worship today," in *The Identity of Anglican Worship*, ed. Kenneth Stevenson and Bryan Spinks (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), pp. 1-13, esp. p. 10.

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