

Blessings and the Anglican Church of Canada

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1. Introduction

It may come as a surprise that anyone should be prepared to say anything on the topic of blessings while professing not to be speaking for one 'side' or the other in what has become a lengthy and acrimonious shouting match between 'sides' rather than a discussion among those without a lot invested in a particular view. In this match, the level of rhetoric has sunk to new lows,¹ and the possible positions and even attention of what may be assumed to be the bulk of the members of the Anglican Church of Canada have been ignored. One important position that the mainstream customarily maintains is respect for the fringes, which are not always lunatic. Without diversity of opinion there is no mainstream. This essay is intended to state a position that one choosing not to take sides might hold and why one might hold it. It will take some time because the matter is not a simple one, and the position being justified will not be one entirely satisfactory to either 'side' but possibly acceptable; that might recommend it to those not taking sides. Not to keep a reader in undue suspense, the position is that, with necessary but not grudging qualifications, blessings ought to be available to any person or couple legally married, but not what appears really to be wanted by one 'side' and anathema to the other. This will require some explanation, hence some due suspense.

2. Oddities of blessings

The relevant kind of blessings are strange things and not overly theologized. They are strange in several respects.

1. They are prayers but are addressed to a person not to God. 'You' in a prayer is usually God, but in a blessing the person on whom the blessing is pronounced is 'you', God being spoken *of* not *to*. This peculiarity seems to be the main defining characteristic of blessings as prayers for persons.

2. Anyone can bless anyone.² As a eucharistic ministrant I bless all comers at the communion rail, and my qualification to do this is merely a licence from the Bishop to administer the eucharist. Parents can and do bless their own children, and everyone knows there are no qualifications at all for parenthood. Anyone can end a letter to a friend with a blessing. The ordination service in the *Book of Common Prayer* says nothing about blessings for the good reason that anyone being ordained has been able to pronounce blessings for ever.³ At an extreme, persons bless themselves.

3. Despite or because of the previous point, there is an apparently superstitious view, how widely held I do not know, that blessings pronounced by different ranks of person have different worth (papal, archepiscopal, episcopal, priestly, lay). If the blessing is duly authorized on behalf of the Church, then the ministrant ought to matter as little as a eucharistic ministrant, and if it is not authorized, then the current dispute is about nothing at all. We are eventually concerned with authorized blessings.

4. Blessing is something that is not universally done among Christians. Extreme Protestants like Mennonites, for example, do not bless. It is just something that stopped with the Reformation.

Partly because of these peculiarities, blessing is a confused matter and confusing to discuss. We do appear to be forced into it, however. A useful first step is to consider various meanings of 'bless' as action. To begin with, there is the distinction between bestowing a blessing and merely pronouncing a verbal form of a blessing. For the most part it is God that bestows blessings,

¹ The coupling of abortions with same-sex blessings by a letter writer to the *Anglican Journal* (April 2008), with the implied equivalence of those performing them, is too low.

² Vatican II took this view.

³ The mention of blessing in the *Book of Alternate Services*, (p. 649), is an innovation but in keeping with Anglican and medieval western custom.

initially blessing the whole of creation with its existence and especially blessing Noah and his family, representing all humankind, after the flood (Gen. 9:1), commanding them to fill the earth. The current discussion is about pronouncing blessings with, I take it, no thought that such prayers are either binding on God by being said nor by being left unsaid. In short, the discussion is about our behaviour as persons and collectively, not about what God may and may not do. It appears that God has blessed some same-sex couples with some of the many blessings we are equipped to enjoy and that God has not blessed many opposite-sex couples. We are clearly not in a position to dictate divine behaviour, and there is enough of our own to talk about.

3. Sorts of blessing

1. We bless God; it is the Jewish way of giving thanks for food and is done routinely to the present day all the way from the New Testament, where Jesus blesses food before the feeding of the 5000 (Mt. 14:19, Mk 6:41, Lk. 9:16) and the feeding of the 4000 (Mk 8:7), at the Last Supper (Mt. 26:26, Mk 14:22, Lk. 22:17), and at Emmaus (Lk. 24:30). The meaning is particularly clear because in Lk. 22:17 the passage parallel to the other gospels has ‘gave thanks’ (eucharistēsas) rather than ‘bless’ (eulogēsas). No responding action of God is expected; this blessing *is* a response. The opposite is possible; Job is prompted to curse God and die.
2. Some churches’ clergy bless things, buildings, cemeteries, to set them apart for special purposes. In these cases it is not clear whether a responding action of God is desired or even possible; it is we that set the things apart. And the opposite is quite different from a curse. We deconsecrate.
3. Some churches consecrate bishops to set them apart for special purposes. In this case it is clear that a blessing action of God is called for. And we do not deconsecrate bishops when they retire.
4. We, that is some of us, bless animals, things, and buildings not to set them apart for special purposes but to pray for their owners and users, in some cases perhaps more specifically for particular ends. There appear not to be opposites or end-points to these blessings.
5. We bless persons in a wide variety of contexts. Eucharistic ministrants bless whoever does not wish to receive holy communion. The Pope blesses whoever is in St Peter’s Square. In these two cases and the many in between no thought is given to the worthiness of the persons blessed or what blessing God might grant them. The opposite of blessing in this context is cursing.

The remark that one can have one’s dog blessed but not one’s civil marriage is an empty rhetorical flourish that mixes numbers four and five. Marriages do not have owners or users as in four, rather partners as in five. A relation is not a thing but is *between* things or persons over time. Accordingly, it cannot be present to be blessed as either things or persons can be blessed. While rubrics refer to blessing marriages, what formularies actually prescribe is—inevitably—blessing marriage partners—what blessing a marriage comes to. One can no more bless (although one can pray for) a marriage than an incumbency or episcopacy or primacy. This has to do with the nature of such relations and is like the fact that, while one can write a letter to an organization, one cannot speak to it, only to a meeting of its members, what addressing an organization comes to. So the present essay is intended to be relevant to the blessing of partners in same-sex marriages without having or needing a position on approving or disapproving of such marriages.

6. Beyond our Jewish and Christian blessings above, we need here to take into account the culture in which we are regarded as dominant.

One of the difficulties we suffer, more than compensating for the much-touted dominance of Christianity in North American culture, is that we do not have ownership of our own contribution to that culture: terms, symbols, and holidays, for example. Christmas is about buying gifts and Santa Claus, Easter is about lilies, chocolate, and rabbits, and blessing means giving approval or merely consent. I shall call this consent meaning ‘newspaper’ blessing.⁴ While loosely based on something Christian, it is not even *based* on any of the five sorts of blessings listed above. Speaking of blessing as granting consent seems more closely based on parents’ ‘giving their

⁴ The newspaper sense of blessing as consent was exemplified in the *Anglican Journal* for January 2009 where, in a story on the creation of a new province to take account of theological differences—so in this very context, the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada was said to have been ‘critical of the plan to proceed with or without the blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury’. Ecclesiastical blessing is clearly not in mind.

blessing' to a marriage, not at the wedding but in advance of engagement or betrothal. I suspect that the expression comes originally from a segment of the long-ago population of North America sufficiently Protestant that it would have been shocked at the suggestion that the parents should literally bless the young couple. I am sure that they would have had no idea how to go about it. This long-dead metaphor—despite its Christian and even Biblical basis—has been resurrected by the sides of the debate, who want approval or want to deny approval to same-sex marriages. Church blessings, however, are not about approval any more than holding weddings and other ceremonies not in a church betokens anyone's disapproval. To the extent that the desire for blessing of same-sex marriages is a desire for a church blessing of the marriage in much the same way that marriages are now blessed, I see no reason to object to it. To the extent that it is more than that, it seems quite impossible. I'll get to what more it might be, but that includes any sort of approval. Disapproved-of persons have always been married—and more recently remarried as well—and their marriages blessed in hopes of, among other things, amendment of life. Blessing a marriage is not approving of it, the Church not being in a position either to approve or to disapprove of most marriages. The whole relation to approval is what philosophers call a category mistake arising from the ambient culture, which we are said to dominate but which in this respect is dominating us.

4. Magic

Before saying more about this, I need to go to the Biblical basis for it all and look at it for clues to where we are because I find that I understand things better when I have their history at least somewhat behind them. I'm going to start off with what I take magic to be, namely the notion that, if you say and do the right things, you can exert control on things or persons or even gods. To some extent what we regard as magic is relative, since there *are* things we can do or say that do make things happen: think VISA chit. And it really *is* because you sign your name not someone else's on the chit that the shop is paid its money. To an observer that didn't know how it worked, our system of credit cards could seem magical. It is not magical to us because we know how it works in an entirely physical and legal way. I would not be comfortable with magic in my religion; I don't think that the things we say and do control God. Almost all we can do is make requests, some of which we regard as routinely granted in our sacraments—baptism and the eucharist most notably—and within the latter context absolution. These things are not magical to anyone so far as I know, but magic is not irrelevant.

5. The Old Testament

To talk about the Bible we need two timelines, unfortunately. There is real time, in which God created the world and Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and David was a king and Jesus lived, but there is also the timeline of the authorship of the documents. And to talk about blessings one needs to operate in both timelines. The really big blessing, on which all others are based, is creation. God created the world and saw that it was good. We are blessed by existence and the bounty of the world. We are also blessed by the life and death of Jesus, the other big source of blessing. The very beginning is where Genesis begins, but the beginning of Genesis is not the first thing that was written down. Blessings in the Bible begin with patriarchal blessings, and with them we are (in the writing or pre-writing) long before the theological sophistication of the beginning of Genesis. Blessing for the patriarchs was an inner power of the soul, according to one of my sources,⁵ manifested primarily by fertility, the survival of the family. One who possesses blessing is full of blessedness, and power flows out of him. The blessing of Jacob by Isaac is a primitive not particularly religious act by which Isaac passes his blessedness on to Jacob. Note that in Genesis 27 the magical nature of the act is indicated by the fact that the blessing cannot be recalled despite its having been obtained by deceit.⁶ Rebekah is similarly blessed when she leaves home with Abraham's servant (Gen. 24:60); her family were relatives but not Jews, not followers of Abraham's God.

What the Biblical writer called J by scholars does with this material is to use it to describe the relation of God to Abraham. God promises great blessing to Abraham, but this blessing

⁵ Pedersen, quoted Westermann, p. 18.

⁶ Grüneberg (p. 6) disputes the magical interpretation.

is a historical process that much of the Hebrew Bible describes, not the sort of blessing with which Abraham will bless Isaac. Old J theologizes the idea of blessing by making it the action of God rather than magic.⁷ This is a theory very easy to follow. What looked like magic to the patriarchs was, when it worked, the action of God. God remained free to act or not to act, the human action of pronouncing a blessing is distinct from the divine action of blessing.

We have two more stages in the Hebrew scriptures before we get to the New Testament. The writer called P because he represents the priests in Jerusalem takes the theologized blessing of J and locates it in the sanctuary in Jerusalem, making it part of the cultic observances of the settled Israelites of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel (Num. 6:22–27). Cursing, incidentally, was never theologized like blessing,⁸ remaining a magical notion to this day. The blessing of P is more God's blessing of the people in general, in body, field, and cattle. 'Blessing flows forth from the cultic acts in the temple upon the people and the land.'⁹ Such changes as these did not succeed easily. There are many places in the historical books of the Old Testament where local adherence to the Baals (fertility gods) is mentioned. It is only at this late stage in the real timeline that the beginning of Genesis is written with its sophisticated view of the creation (not out of pre-existing material) and universal blessing of all that God created. The writer called D has a go at linking God's blessing, which is universal (we are all created) if not uniform (not all are equally lucky), to obedience to the Law throughout Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut. 7:12–13 'because you harken to these ordinances... he will love you, bless you, and multiply you...' [RSV]). Blessing became what the biblical theologian Westermann calls 'a component of the covenant between God and the people' (p. 48). This theological theory of blessing's being conditional is an innovation, he says, and there is significant evidence that it did not work as a theory. Westermann (p. 63) cites Psalm 73 as an example of the problem that it does not work. Ecclesiastes knows that good is not rewarded. The book of Job is about the theory's failure. Job is temporarily cursed despite being blameless, but life is temporary. The blessing of God, despite old D, is not so simple. And the Church has taken this on in its belief that Jesus died for sinners (all of us) not just those that are perfect. God sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. The Jerusalem priestly blessings are pronounced on all, and God's blessings fall on all. The conditionality of God's blessings in D's view is the only apparent justification I have found for the attitude that one needs somehow to qualify for blessing. That attitude is an unjustified transfer to Church action of D's erroneous theory of God's action and so is two steps from being acceptable.

6. The New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament, we see all of this heritage of blessings in the Hebrew Scriptures taken over. It appears to have been entirely unproblematic for the actors in the events of the New Testament, including Acts and the travels of Paul. In these Christian writings all is Christianized. New ideas appear, but there seems to be no disrespect to the old ideas. In some places the heritage is stronger (Mk 10:13–16, Jesus blessing children; Lk. 24:50, Jesus blessing the disciples at the Ascension) and in others Christianizing is dominant (Rom. 15:29; Eph. 1:3, blessing in Christ). Authorities differ on just what is left of the Hebrew blessing idea because one can regard it as swallowed up in salvation, but something is obviously left since pronouncing blessings survives in at least one of its traditional contexts, the opening and closing of the New Testament epistles corresponding to greeting and departing. 'Good-bye' is even now a rather feeble reference to blessing compared with the German 'Grüss Gott', which is still used in the south of Germany.

7. Jesus

A peculiarity in the behaviour of Jesus from which we have something to learn is his adherence to the divine lack of discrimination in bestowing (not pronouncing) blessings. Again and again, particularly in the synoptic Gospels, he forgives sins or heals simply because he can: the woman with the ointment (Lk. 7:36–50), son of the widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11–17), man with the withered hand (Lk. 6:6–11), Gadarene/Gerasene demoniac (Lk. 8:26–39), and Jairus's daughter (Lk. 8:40–

⁷ Westermann, p. 58.

⁸ Westermann, p. 23, n. 12.

⁹ Westermann, p. 35, with references to Ps. 65, 115:12–15, 128, 129:8, 132:11–19.

42, 49–56) in just two chapters. The list is much longer. It is as clear as could be that Jesus does not test persons first but blesses them in a variety of concrete ways. He sets his face by example against the conditionality of blessing, even when there is reason to assume guilt. He saves the life of the woman caught in adultery, merely cautioning her not to sin in future. He likewise cautions the man healed at the Sheep Gate not to sin ‘that nothing more befall you’ (Jn 5:14), but he heals him unconditionally. Among his non-parabolic sayings are also direct contradictions of such conditionality. When he is asked whether the man born blind or his parents sinned (Jn 9:1-41) he replies neither. Nor is this a Johannine peculiarity. Luke has Jesus say that the Galileans killed by Pilate (13:1-2) and those on whom the tower of Siloam fell (13:4) were no worse than others. The bad things that happen needn’t be punishments any more than the good need be rewards. Good things are opportunities like the manuring of the fig tree in Luke 13:8 (blessed precisely because it does not bear) after which, if it bears fruit, it will not be cut down and burned. The blessing in this case is based on the tree’s *not* deserving. The disciples reveal what was apparently the standard view of their time and place that those blessed by God were, on that account, rich. They are therefore shocked by the saying (Mt. 19:23, Mk 10:24, 26, Lk. 18:24, 26) that ‘it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven’ and respond, ‘who can?’. Without denying that becoming rich is a blessing, Jesus denies its importance in the larger scheme of things. Such blessings are opportunities not guarantees (the rich fool, Lk. 12:16–21). The standard and universal (Orthodox, Roman, Anglican, and Protestant) way to put the above is that divine grace is freely given. While it may lead to gratitude, faith, and good works, it is not at all dependent on antecedent good works, is not earned by worthiness.

There is one striking blessing saying of Jesus, his exhortation ‘Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.’ (Lk. 6:27–28 [RSV]; Rom. 12:14; 1 Cor. 4:12–13a; 1 Pet. 3:9) It takes to the limit the rejection of the idea that any sort of test needs to be passed before we can bless. Moreover, the prayer of Jesus to the Father to forgive those killing him is a practical and extreme example of putting this idea into practice. This transition to forgiveness of offences to oneself takes us—if we are prepared to go—to an important aspect of what makes the morality of Jesus distinctively lofty. He is clear that being judgemental is not our job. In the beatitudes, the merciful are blessed (Mt. 5:7). We are urged to be merciful as our Father is merciful (Lk. 6:36), which is not just once (Mt. 18:21–22; Lk. 17:3–4). The point Jesus makes with the parable of the good Samaritan is that we are to be merciful (Lk. 10:37). Against offence, we are to turn the other cheek (Mt. 5:39-42, Lk. 6:29–31). The saying with which I began this paragraph is embedded in an instruction to love our enemies (Lk. 6:27–28, 32-35; Mt. 5:43–46). In a rare *quid pro quo* remark, Jesus tells us that if we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven (Mt. 6:14–15). On the basis of all of this concerning those offending us personally, I find it impossible to follow those that hold that there ought to be any sort of qualification for being blessed by the Church. I am not prepared to argue that they should change their minds about homosexuals, just about what the Church ought are prepared to do for them. If they want to opt out, that is their business. On that point we have Jesus on the peril of self-righteousness (publican and Pharisee, Lk. 18:9–14; judge not, Mt. 7:1–2, Lk. 6:41–42) and even more pointedly ‘speck and beam’ (Mt. 7:3–5, Lk. 6:37–38).

8. Vatican II

Before concluding I want to add something more up to date. It is notorious that the use of blessings was something the reformers took exception to in their day, and my Roman Catholic source also mentions Cardinal Léger of Montreal complaining in 1962 just before Vatican II that in blessing some things ‘the celebrant prayed for them instead of for the persons who use them’ (Kaczynski, p. 402, n. 6). So the situation was still untidy within living memory. This seems to be one of those areas where Vatican II did a thorough job of dealing with complaints of sixteenth-century reformers. For it, blessings are ultimately ‘to give worship to God’ (SC 59), being ‘laudatory invocations of God’. ‘[T]he Church gratefully remembers the fact that human beings are already blessed by creation and redemption, and it thanks God for this.’ (SC 59) The ‘act of celebrating [blessings] most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace [prayed for] to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity’. (SC 59) According to Kaczynski, ‘Human beings who receive blessings [he means verbal blessings] are to experience

thereby the fact that they have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and are sustained by God's ever-present goodness.' (p. 395) 'Things [blessed] do not thereby undergo any change in their nature; rather their nature is more deeply understood and better acknowledged, namely, that they have their origin in the blessing given by the Creator and are meant to be pointers to the new blessing that redemption has brought into the world.' (p. 396) Spoken blessings are 'signs of salvation'; ... 'where faith is lacking and the meaning of Christian intercessory prayer is not understood and its justification not recognized, the celebration of blessings is worthless; where people expect blessings to work automatically, the reproach of superstition and magic is justified.' (p. 396) 'In the celebration of blessings, the praise and intercessory action of the Church is indispensable.' (p. 397)

9. Conclusion

Where do these considerations take us? And what is the blessing of a person? Blessing of a person is a prayer for that person's welfare, but that could be done in the third person. By addressing the blessing to the person prayed for, we add to our prayer the assurance of the Church's prayer for that person. This depends on the worthiness of the person prayed for no more than on the worthiness of the person praying. Are not penitents traditionally blessed after confessions, convicted criminals blessed in jail, and in particular those sentenced to death blessed by the judge passing the sentence?¹⁰ It is barking up the wrong tree to think same-sex couples ought not to be blessed because one disapproves of them. The more one disapproves, the more one thinks blessing is needed, keeping in mind that approving and Church blessings are distinct. On the other hand, the idea that same-sex civil marriages and marriages between the elderly should be treated with the same awe as what used to be called the solemnization of matrimony (mother-making) is as far-fetched as the notion that opposite-sex marriages are *ipso facto* superior. Some are catastrophic, mother-making or not. No doubt all vary. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with marriages that do not produce children, of necessity or by choice. They obviously lack the awe-inspiring element of procreation, sharing with God in the creation of new persons, but there is a great deal to be said for them. Exclusivity is so obviously preferable to promiscuity that a pledge of it ought to be recognized as preferable by everyone.

On the other hand, if the homosexual lobby wants not just the blessings of the Church but its approval, then it will be disappointed. The Church is, as I remarked, not in a position to approve or disapprove of persons or couples, and that is probably just as well.

We have here an issue that is presented by one side as pastoral and by the other side as moral. Rhetoric has run away with the issue: the Church's issue of blessings (not marriages and not newspaper blessings) is clearly both pastoral and moral. The pastoral issue has to do with what we can do, and the moral issue has to do with what (as usual) we—not others—ought to do. There are no limits on whom we can and therefore ought to bless.

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¹⁰ According to the website www.capitalpunishmentuk.org, until 1948 the English sentencing for capital crimes was '(full name of prisoner) you will be taken hence to the prison in which you were last confined and from there to a place of execution where you will be hanged by the neck until you are dead and thereafter your body buried within the precincts of the prison and may the Lord have mercy upon your soul.'