



SAME-SEX BLESSINGS:

A Systematic-Theological Rationale

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A. Introduction

1. The impulse for a re-examination of the previous understanding of same-sex unions comes from the experience of Western churches of the presence in our midst of gay and lesbian Christians living in committed relationships of fidelity, caring and love. The concept of “experience” refers to the practical discernment of the working of the Spirit in the life of the church. It is a Biblical principle that this discernment is based on the spiritual fruits manifested in the lives of Christians (Matthew 7:15-20; Galatians 5:22-23). With the growing openness in our society towards homosexuality, we have realized that homosexuals are not someone else: they are members of our church (and often of our families), living Christian lives and often living in relationships that show the fruits of fidelity and kindness over the course of a lifetime.
2. Experience alone is an insufficient basis for the church’s theological judgements; we are required to measure and test the phenomena against our core understanding of the truth of the gospel, as reflected in the Scriptures and the core texts of our tradition. This is the process of theological reflection proper. Although it has been ongoing on this topic for decades, many in the Communion have not yet heard the arguments made with sufficient clarity. There is accordingly an onus on our church, as we consider the possibility of changing our practice, to give a theological account, to seek to articulate with ever greater clarity how this innovation relates to the Gospel. The minimal result of this work would have to be to show that same-sex blessings are compatible with the Gospel, so that they are permitted in the church. A further potential result might be the discovery that they are demanded by the Gospel, a discernment that the church is actively called to change its teaching and practice.
3. It is perhaps best to avoid the language of “making the case” for or against same-sex blessings; the courtroom metaphor tends to cast the question in oppositional terms, which does not do justice to our calling to thoughtful and prayerful common discernment. While opposition may be the reality of how the church is approaching the issue, we should not reinforce or normalize this through our language. This reflection will not attempt to formulate binding proofs that wish to compel assent. No argument offered can clinch the dispute; counter-arguments can be made to each. This lies in the nature of theological discourse: it is rational, but it is not the rationality of the strict and cogent syllogism. Theology cannot force our assent, any more than God compels our worship. Both rest on the willing engagement of faith. In methodological terms, this means that theology convinces not by linear syllogisms, but by offering a coherent rational vision of God and reality that rings most true to our faith in Jesus Christ.
4. The approach taken here will be systematic: grounding specific questions of human behaviour in a broader Christian vision of what it means to be human, and what Christian holiness consists of. This in turn must be

grounded in a still more fundamental understanding of who God is, and how God relates to us. This understanding is the core of the gospel, as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, as witnessed in Scripture and interpreted by the credal tradition of the church. The path of theological argumentation thus begins with the core nature of God, proceeds to a Christian anthropology, and from there to a consideration of human sexuality and the fact of homosexuality.

B. Theological and Anthropological Context

5. The starting-point of theological reflection is the nature of God — not as derived from general philosophical principles, but from the self-revelation of God as witnessed in Holy Scriptures. For the Christian doctrinal tradition, God is understood in God's inmost being as Trinity, the eternal relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Love is not an incidental attribute of God, one divine characteristic among many, but is at the very centre of who God is; not as an abstraction, but a real and eternal activity. God is not the monolithic principle of absolute monotheism (nor certainly the conflicting and relative projections of polytheism!), but most fundamentally being in relationship, the specific eternal perichoresis of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Faith in the Trinity has consequences for all the rest of our theology. Whereas absolute monotheism implies an ethic of hierarchy, subordination and uniformity, the doctrine of the Trinity privileges relationship, mutuality and diversity.
6. The Trinitarian nature of God is also the key to our own identity as human beings. Our creation is itself an act of the overflowing love of the Trinity, which in its infinite generosity reached beyond its perfect self-sufficiency to create another. We exist, beings distinct from God, because we are loved by God and in order to love God. We exist as individual human beings, in all the diversity of the human condition, in order to cultivate relationships of love with one another. God's love is not the attraction of like to like, but the challenging and reconciling love of the other. Human diversity, then, is not a fall from grace, but the gift that enables us to fulfill our calling to love. In the Spirit's action at Pentecost (not reversing, but blessing, the diversity of Babel), in the mission to the Gentiles which arose from it, in the Pauline vision of a community defined by the reconciliation of diversity (Galatians 3:18), the practice of this love takes communal form in the church.
7. The Biblical creation story expresses the human capacity to be in relationship in the concept of the *imago Dei*. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gen 1:27). The passage links the image of God to the fact of our gender diversity. What cannot be meant by this passage is that this gender diversity is constitutive of God's own being: this would place God on the level of the fertility deities consistently rejected by the Biblical witness. God is neither male nor female nor some combination of both; while God is the origin of both the masculine and feminine equally, these categories do not define God. The image of God we bear is thus not gender complementarity (that is shared by many life-forms, whereas the *imago* is clearly a *proprium* of humanity); it is rather the capacity to be in relationship, the capacity to exercise the divine love of the other, symbolized by the fundamental human diversity of male and female.
8. The purpose of human existence, then, is to love. We are created to be in relationship, with God and with one another. This primary theological purpose is the basis of all Christian ethics. Sin, in its most fundamental nature, is all that destroys these two relationships. The New Testament expresses this explicitly by designating the Great Commandment to love as the summary of the law and the prophets — a theme central to the Synoptic, Johannine and Pauline traditions.¹

1. Cf. Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-31; Lk 10:25-28; Jn 13:34, 15:12; 1 John 3:11; Rom 13:8-10.

C. Marriage and Sexuality

9. The purpose of living in loving relationships finds its concrete shape in particular more or less institutional relationships: the church community, family relationships (such as parent-child or sibling), friendship, workplace communities, political institutions, etc. Among these, marriage has a distinct place: not the most important theologically (that would surely be our relationships in the body of Christ), but with its own distinct shape. This shape has been defined by the Christian tradition and our wedding liturgies in terms of the three purposes of marriage: mutual support, procreation, and sexual expression. These three purposes of marriage are to be understood in terms of our fundamental calling to be in loving relationship.²
10. Marriage is most fundamentally a community of and school for Christian love, characterized by the “mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other.” This particular relationship is defined by the commitments of love, fidelity and permanence made in the marriage vows: marriage is that form of Christian community where we take on the responsibility of loving one particular individual in the unremitting intimacy of daily life, over the course of a lifetime.
11. Secondly, and on the basis of the preceding purpose, marriage has been seen as the ideal context for the procreation and raising of children. It must be noted, however, that this purpose is not absolute in the Anglican tradition: we have always recognized childless couples as fully married; our liturgy provides for the marriage of couples beyond childbearing age; and, on the other hand, we recognize single parents, extended families, and adoptive relationships as valid forms of parenting.³
12. Marriage is also (in the context of this agapic love) the community where we live out the erotic aspects of love, our desire and need to be desired, with the one person we can trust to share the joy and burden of our sexuality. The Christian tradition has recognized sexuality as a fundamental human need.⁴ When we have lost sight of this, it is when we have denied our nature as incarnate beings, to our great detriment.⁵ This recognition of a fundamental need is clearly not a licence to act out all of our impulses. This need goes beyond any specific acts and desires; it is at root our need to be cherished, to be desired, to be found wholly beautiful in body and soul. It is a place of great intimacy and vulnerability.
13. By this very intimacy, our sexuality is an area of heightened moral danger. Sex is not intrinsically sinful, but neither is it, in a post-Edenic world, exempt from our fallenness. As we come so close to another person’s sense of worth, the responsibility to be trustworthy, gentle and generous is great. In our sexuality we are confronted in

2. Much has been made of the differing order of the three purposes in the *BCP*, *Canadian BCP* and *BAS* liturgies; and it is indeed probable that the reordering in the *BAS* is intended to emphasize the primary importance of “mutual comfort and help.” However, it does not follow that the original *BCP* order means conversely to imply a primacy of procreation. Not until 1662 was the word “first” used, which might be open to this construction; the 1549 wording, “one cause,” clearly is not. Furthermore, the precedent of Augustine’s *On the Good of Marriage*, which names “friendship” as primary, makes it unlikely that the *BCP* intends to teach that child-bearing is a primary purpose.

3. The historic collusion of the Church in civil society’s discrimination against illegitimate children is increasingly recognized as an unchristian adoption of the values of secular society. This particular prejudice is untenable in a community that confesses that its Lord is a “bastard” — as we effectively do in the Nicene Creed.

4. Cf. 1 Cor 7:3,5,9; note also the Prayer Book’s reference to “those that have not the gift of continency” (from 1552 on).

5. This is of course not to deny the role of celibacy as an honourable alternative to marriage in the Christian tradition; but our tradition, at least since the Reformation, sees it as a special vocation for some, not as a morally superior choice for everybody.

graphic clarity with the shadow side of ourselves: the temptation to gratify our own needs selfishly, to dominate and objectify the other. The ethical value of our sexual expression is defined by the quality of relationship; to the extent that a relationship is trustworthy, caring, committed and mutual, healthy sexual expression can flourish. The covenant of marriage promotes this kind of relationship, but it cannot guarantee it. It must be lived out in genuine love.⁶

14. Christian faith has come to recognize (somewhat belatedly and hesitantly, it is true) the fundamental goodness of sexuality as a gift of God to be celebrated.⁷ In the context of a committed relationship, as it serves to deepen the couple's love and care for one another, sex brings not only physical pleasure, but much more importantly the experience of being known and loved, expressed through the body. The Christian tradition has seen a quasi-sacramental function in sexuality as an expression of love. The experience of being beloved, accepted and desired by another human being, and its bodily expression in sexual love, is one of the fundamental existential correlates by which we can understand experientially (sacramentally) the wonder of God's love for us (parental love being another).⁸ Thus both Scripture and the Christian tradition have developed the sexual metaphor: for example, in the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, or the Bride imagery of Ephesians (5:25-33) and Revelation (21:2; 22:17). Unlike pagan religions which sacralized the fertility inherent in sexuality, in the Judeo-Christian tradition it is the "delight and tenderness" of sexual love that serves as a symbol of God's love.

D. Homosexuality

15. It is in the context of this account of the nature of God, human destiny and the purpose of marriage and sexuality that the Church has been brought to confront the phenomenon of homosexuality. The fact of homosexuality is new to the church, as to our culture at large. While same-sex eroticism is certainly familiar to the ancient world, Biblical as well as classical, the phenomenon of sexual orientation has been recognized only in the past century and a half.⁹ Sexual orientation refers to a basic orientation of desire towards one gender or the other, as a fundamental aspect of a person's character. This orientation is not chosen, but given in a person's self-experience. There is no indication that the Biblical texts anywhere address homosexuality as an orientation; it is specific sexual acts that are mentioned.¹⁰ Homosexual orientation is a "new" fact for the church; not because it did not exist before, but because until recently the church has remained ignorant of it. As with other "new" facts (such

6. One of the chief weaknesses of traditional Christian sexual ethics has been its tendency to rely completely on external criteria to determine what sexual activity is acceptable. Most commonly the criterion is solely the presence or absence of a marriage contract, although in some cases (esp. in parts of the Roman Catholic Church) the moralists have attempted to regulate the particular physical shape of sexual acts themselves. The problem is that such a purely external standard cannot reflect the complexities of human relationships. It has led the church to condemn and forbid many caring and godly relationships, while at the same time shutting its eyes to abusive and loveless marital relations.

7. "That they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love" (*BAS*, p 528).

8. Parental love is the category by which we understand the doctrines of creation and providence, acts of grace primarily associated with the first person of the Trinity. Sexual love is a metaphor for the doctrine of election: the wonder that God has chosen humankind as objects of divine love, through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

9. The first use of the word "homosexual" dates to 1869.

10. This is evident in the oft-cited passage in Romans (the men likewise gave up the natural use of women and were consumed with passion for one another 1:27), which clearly envisages homosexual activity as a culpable turning away from heterosexuality. As some gay men have argued, the passage can hardly apply to them, as the "use" of women is not natural to them, and indeed they cannot be said to have given it up if they have never practised it.

as the heliocentric solar system, biological evolution or liberal democracy) we cannot simply apply old texts intended to answer other questions; we must make sense of it by thinking of it critically in the context of our Christian faith as a whole.

16. A second fact must be immediately added to the above: that, as mentioned in §1, gay men and women are living in committed partnerships, often within the Christian community, that show the same characteristics of love, compassion, fidelity, support and permanence (as well as the same struggles and weaknesses) as heterosexual married couples. This suggests that what is at stake with same-sex relationships is not just an alternative between sin or ethical indifference, but the positive good of a mature agapic partnership. The close structural parallels between these partnerships and traditional marriage means that we must consider them in light of the traditional purposes of marriage.¹¹
17. Same-sex unions between Christians are forms of Christian community that fulfill the primary purpose of marriage: “the mutual society, comfort and help that the one ought to have of the other.” They are a form of friendship given particular shape by vows of fidelity and permanence; same-sex couples share the task of loving one individual in intimacy and depth, “for better for worse, for richer for poorer” over the course of a lifetime. This is not something we should lightly dismiss, as though love were just a special privilege or unnecessary extra. While some people are called to celibacy, for those who are not, a love relationship is a major Christian responsibility, one of the key ways in which they are called to live out the ethic of Christ-like love, and so is an essential part of their realizing the full humanity to which they are called. We must pay due heed to the traditional understanding that the commitment to this kind of relationship articulated in the marriage vows should be expected of all serious love relationships.
18. As for the second purpose of marriage: these friendships are also sexual in nature.¹² This is, obviously, the core of the controversy: whether the sexual aspect of these relationships is acceptable to God.¹³ The question must be contextualized in two ways. Sexuality exists in the context of the broader and deeper relationship just mentioned, and cannot be discussed apart from it. Sex is only part of any marriage, measured against decades of companionship and domestic life; it is a significant part, but one we should beware of taking out of its context.

11. This is not to prejudge the question as to whether same-sex unions are ultimately most appropriately seen simply as identical to heterosexual marriage (to be regulated by amending the Marriage Canon) or as a parallel category of covenanted relationships. The St. Michael Report recognized committed same-sex unions as “analogous” to marriage, leaving the question of the precise identity and difference open. More theological work would be necessary on this question if the church were to proceed with a revision of the Marriage Canon. Should the canonical provisions be identical? Would we use identical liturgies for heterosexual marriage and for same-sex blessings? These are theological questions, that must be decided independently of the civil status of same-sex relationships. What is currently at stake, however, is not the ultimate form of these blessings, but the preliminary question of whether the church should bless these relationships.

12. For this reason it seems to me that the proposal to model same-sex blessings on the analogy of monastic friendship covenants, rather than on the analogy of heterosexual marriage, is inadequate. Although I would argue that the *details* of a couple’s sexual expression (for both hetero- and homosexual couples) is no one’s business but their own, the *fact* that it is a sexual relationship is to be acknowledged and celebrated by the community.

13. Much of the discomfort around the blessing of same-sex unions appears to revolve around a misunderstanding of the relationship between marriage and sexuality: that marriage is a rite by which the church endorses specific sexual acts, in the concrete sense of blessing whatever goes on in the couple’s bed. It is, rather, the relationship that we bless; in the context of that relationship the church leaves it up to the couple to discern those forms of physical expression appropriate to the dignity of their relationship. It has, mercifully, not been the custom for some time in our Anglican tradition to preach on which particular sexual acts or positions are acceptable — at least, for heterosexuals. Neither in marriage nor in the blessing of a same-sex relationship is the church passing any judgement, positive or negative, on any specific forms of sexual expression.

Secondly, a theological consideration of gay sexuality is not a licence to take a prurient and graphic interest in specific sexual acts. Sexual intimacy (anyone's sexual intimacy) is far too subtle a business to be caught by mechanical descriptions of what body part comes in contact with what other one. What is tender and intimate to the grace-filled eyes of love can always appear shameful when viewed by others with hostility or indifference.

19. As for the third purpose of marriage, the procreation and raising of children: clearly same-sex couples are not able to conceive a child together. The same can be said for many heterosexual couples, whose marriage is nonetheless recognized by the church as fully valid. And many same-sex couples do choose to raise children, and provide loving and healthy homes.
20. Covenanted same-sex relationships, then, are analogous to marriage. They are similar in structure, in terms of the commitments made by the couple, the quality of relationship, the dimension of sexuality, and the capacity, if not to conceive, to nourish children or otherwise provide a home for others. The only significant difference is that the partners are of the same gender. In seeking to enter covenanted relationships, homosexual Christians are striving to live out their orientation as a form of agapic love to which all Christians are called (1 Cor 13), by taking on the same responsibilities to one another and to the community as heterosexual Christians do. On the basis of the purposes of marriage it would seem not only that there are no significant obstacles to same-sex blessings, but that they are a positive good in terms of a Christian understanding of relationship.
21. There remains the question of "complementarity:" whether the "natural" complementarity of male and female is an essential element in love relationships (whether marriage or a parallel category of blessings). The argument is sometimes made, on the basis of Ephesians 5, that sexual complementarity is essential to the nature of marriage, precisely in its "sacramental" function of imaging the relationship between Christ and the Church.¹⁴ On this account, it is precisely the differentiation of roles in the couple (the husband loving, the wife obeying) that makes marriage a fit metaphor for Christ's relationship to us. Same-sex blessings then would be an erosion of this vision.¹⁵ It could be answered that such a reading of Ephesians emphasizes precisely the point on which the text is most caught in the cultural assumptions of its contemporary society, and so fails to rise to that vision of a community where gender differences have been transcended expressed in the earliest Christian witness.¹⁶ The theologically more significant aspect of the passage is the call to be Christ to one another: husband to wife, but also, surely, wife to husband. This vision of marriage as a community liberated from patriarchal structures leaves room for differently patterned heterosexual as well as same-sex relationships.¹⁷ The complementarity argument must be rejected because it reflects a fundamentally pagan conception of marriage, in which the "natural" complementarity of male and female trumps the new creation of Christian community; so that marriage becomes ultimately reproductive in nature, rather than ecclesial.

14. "Sacramental" is used here, with the patristic tradition, as a translation of the *mysterion* of Eph 5:32, not in the later scholastic sense disputed by the 39 Articles.

15. As would the view of heterosexual marriage that sees man and woman as undifferentiated partners without pre-determined gender roles, suggested by the dropping of "obey" from the woman's marriage vow. Note that the same pattern of thought, the semantic step of absolutizing a Biblical metaphor into a literal norm to regulate all human behaviour, may be observed in a number of similar arguments: the insistence on exclusively masculine language to designate God, the argument against the ordination of women, and, formerly, Christian anti-Semitism and the Christian defence of slavery or class distinctions. This is not meant to denigrate the argument against same-sex blessings by association with any of these causes, but simply to point out a common logical move, which I suggest is a fallacy.

16. Gal 3:28.

17. It should be noted that the critique of the patriarchal assumptions of "complementarity" does not imply the erasure of all gender characteristics in a bland unisex humanity. It simply claims that gender differences need not be normative in the sense of limiting the created diversity of the individual.

22. With respect to the handful of Biblical texts referring expressly to homosexual behaviour,¹⁸ a few comments will have to suffice for this context:
- a. As mentioned above, none of the texts address either the phenomenon of homosexual orientation, or the context of long-term covenanted relationships. Indeed, there is no indication that either possibility was even remotely within the awareness of the Biblical writers.
 - b. Only Leviticus articulates a prohibition on same-sex activity, or is even talking primarily about same-sex relations. All of the New Testament passages simply cite promiscuous same-sex behaviour as examples: Romans in an argument that links compulsive promiscuity to idolatry, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy in broad lists of vices. As the context is clearly one of promiscuity, the behaviour cited would be equally reprehensible if it were heterosexual. The attempt to draw a general prohibition of same-sex relationships from these passages is an act of exegetical extrapolation.
 - c. The Leviticus passages are part of the “holiness code,” marking out the specific identity of the people of Israel, which has never been understood as binding on Christians. The attempt to claim that “moral” law is binding, while ceremonial law is not (Article vii, Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1962, Canada p. 698) is not practicable, as the text does not recognize this distinction. It amounts to an arbitrary imposing of our cultural values upon the text.¹⁹
23. Reading this handful of negative references in Scripture as a prohibition binding on Christians — in the face of the evidence of faithful, caring, godly relationships — is problematic on a deeper level, because it ignores the strong Scriptural tradition of the critique of the law. A differentiated and conflicted relationship to the law is an essential feature of Jesus’ ministry, as seen in his repeated and intentional violation of Sabbath and purity laws in the name of mercy,²⁰ and in his bitter critique of the Pharisees.²¹ In the Sermon on the Mount he radicalizes the commandments (Mt 5:21-48), understanding them as guiding and convicting our attitudes on a deeper level. In his proclamation of the Great Commandment²² as the summary of all laws, Jesus places the practice of love as the ultimate criterion of Christian moral action. This teaching is taken up and reinforced by Paul (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:13-14), to the point that Paul can accept the phrase “all things are lawful” (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23) as

18. Specifically, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10: a total of six out of over 30,000 verses. One might add a seventh, Genesis 19:5, from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is often cited in this context, although the crime of the Sodomites has more to do with the violation of hospitality than with the gender of the guests they were intending to rape.

19. It is sometimes suggested that a distinction can be made on the basis of the Council of Jerusalem’s interdiction on “fornication” (πορνεία; Acts 15:29). This is problematical on a number of grounds. First of all, there is the question of the meaning of πορνεία, which clearly applies equally to heterosexual and homosexual promiscuity. Secondly, there is the embarrassing fact that the church has tended to ignore the other three stipulations of Acts 15:29 (“abstain from foods offered to idols and from blood and from what is strangled”). Most serious is the fact that Paul’s first-person account in Gal 2:10 directly contradicts Acts’ assertion that there were any stipulations. This is of course not to suggest that fornication was acceptable to Paul (or for that matter to the Christian tradition in general); but it is not so because it does not “build up,” not because it is forbidden by Biblical law.

20. Mk 2:27; 3:4; Lk 11:37; 13:10-17.

21. Mk 7:6-7; Mt 23; Lk 11:42-52.

22. So the Synoptic tradition (Mk 12:28-34; Mt 22:34-40; Lk 10:25-28); “New Commandment” in the Johannine tradition (Jn 13:34; 15:12).

an expression of Christian liberty, limited only — and that is a large reservation! — by what is “beneficial,” what “builds up.” The story of the Peter’s vision of the net let down from heaven (Acts 10:9-16) provides a narrative expression of this primitive Christian critique of the law. To suggest, then, that supposed Biblical prohibitions against homosexuality are not binding on Christians is not a modern liberal evasion, but is consistent with a major theological concern of the New Testament. For Paul especially, this Christian freedom from the law was not about permissiveness, but about the fundamental integrity of the gospel (Gal 5:1-2). If we cite Biblical prohibitions, without paying attention to the extent to which covenanted same-sex relationships are “beneficial” and “build up” both the couple and the community, we are in danger of betraying the evangelical freedom proclaimed by Paul.

24. A central feature of Jesus’ ministry, building on the prophets’ call to justice, is the radical inclusiveness of the community he gathered. In his healings, teaching and table-fellowship, Jesus consistently reached out to those who were marginalised politically, socially and religiously: the poor, women, lepers, the mentally ill, Samaritans, tax-collectors, the ritually unclean, criminals, even Gentiles. A similar ethos of inclusiveness is evident in the earliest Christian community, in which Jew and Gentile, men and women, slave and free came together as equals. For this reason, modern liberationist movements have found inspiration in the Christian gospel, and their concerns have (often belatedly) been accepted by the wider church as necessary consequences of the gospel: we may think of the development of parliamentary democracy, the anti-slavery movement, the civil rights movement, liberation theology, and the women’s movement. The full and equal inclusion of those of homosexual orientation in society and the church cannot be dismissed as a merely secular development; it is a plausible consequence of Jesus’ own practice of including those who suffer contempt and religious marginalisation in their society.
25. Finally, we must consider the pastoral situation of gay men and women in our society. Despite considerable progress in liberal Western society, they still face prejudice, hostility even from family, religious condemnation and occasionally violence. For many, especially young people, this hostility can be internalized as self-loathing. “Coming out” is still an act that demands great public courage and a challenging inner journey towards self-acceptance. What is the church’s responsibility in ministering to these people, who may be strangers to us (but not to Jesus), but also may be our neighbours and children and clergy — ourselves? Our present position of denying them an appropriate form of partnership has only destructive results, encouraging dishonesty, sham marriages, loneliness, perhaps promiscuity, and more self-loathing. We would do well to remember that in our tradition life-long celibacy is seen as a particular and positive vocation, not something that can be imposed on an entire group of people.²³ If the church fails to affirm gay Christians and healthy same-sex relationships, it risks throwing up unnecessary stumbling-blocks to their faith development, and thereby sinning against the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:13; Mk 3:29; 9:42). The blessing of unions is a crucial element in any true welcoming of people of homosexual orientation in the church, because only when the church signals that it values their relationships does it accept homosexuals as homosexuals, not only when they are pretending not to be.²⁴

23. This was recognized by the apostle Paul, even as he recommended celibacy: “it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor 7:9).

24. A word must be said here about the suggestion that homosexuals ought to seek “healing” of their condition through prayer. While the testimony of some who claim to have experienced this kind of healing must be respected as their personal experience, we cannot lose sight of the fact that they are a very small minority of the gay population. The catastrophic rates of “relapse” encountered in such ministries make it clear that they are not a solution for most people of homosexual orientation. Many of these ministries have been condemned as psychologically abusive. While the opportunity should not be denied those few who feel they could benefit from this kind of prayer, it is simply denial to focus on “healing” as a general solution for the gay “problem.”

E. Conclusion

26. In the preceding we have attempted to root the blessing of same-sex relationships in a vision of the breadth of Christian faith. An acceptance of same-sex unions is made possible by our faith in the Trinity — our knowledge that God's very being is a reaching out to the other in love, rather than an absolute principle to which all else must conform. It is supported by an understanding of humanity that sees our created purpose as transcending that of the animals, to be fruitful and multiply: in the *imago Dei*, we are called to respond to and imitate that love which is the dynamic heart of God's being. It is implied by an account of marriage and human sexuality which sees its prime purpose to be that of developing a caring and faithful community in which two people can incorporate something of the love of Christ for one another, and together to the wider community. It is consistent with a conception of holiness, preached by Jesus and Paul, that defines the Christian life not in terms of law, but as the practice of radical love; a life governed by the sole criterion of what builds one another up in community. It is urged upon us by the liberationist practice of Jesus and the early church, consistently breaking down boundaries of prejudice and exclusion in the interests of an ever fuller representation of God's universal love. Taken together, the vision of God and God's purposes set forth here certainly allows us to respond to the pressing pastoral need of gay and lesbian Christians by supporting healthy partnerships. But theological reflection may do more. It may be that we come to realize in time, as the Spirit guides us further into all truth, that we have not permission, but a gospel imperative, to affirm same-sex partnerships. We may come to see our refusal to do so as springing from inadequate and alien conceptions of the nature of God; and by continuing in this refusal, we may find that not only our sexual ethics, but also our ecclesiology, soteriology, anthropology and fundamental theology implicated by these alien assumptions. What is at stake is not just the health of our gay brothers and sisters, but possibly our very theological integrity.