



Blessing

Witnesses to the Gospel, engaging with individuals and couples

Decision adopted by the national Synod

Le Lazaret, Sète, May 17, 2015

0.1. How can we best engage with our contemporaries in their specific circumstances – in their joys and sorrows, in their trajectories whether adopted or endured, in their covenants and separations? How can we do this in such a way as to enable them to hear good news which will give meaning and enjoyment to their whole lives? This issue, already discussed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of France and the Reformed Church of France during the course of many synods over the past twenty or so years, is characteristic of a desire on the part of the United Protestant Church of France to fulfil its calling to bear witness to the Gospel.

0.2. In today's society, more sensitive to things that can be seen rather than things that can be heard, the "gesture/word" of blessing is a highly valuable way of sharing something of the God of Jesus Christ who seeks good for each of us.

1. To bless: a gift to be received and wealth to be shared

1.1. The source of our joy is to be found in the primary "yes" that the God of grace bestows on us in Jesus Christ and which the Holy Spirit allows us to embrace. This blessing is the very foundation of our existence.

1.2. Sharing this joy by being, in our turn, blessing-bearers for the women and men of today is our vocation. With humility and confidence, the United Protestant Church of France accepts the mission of bearing witness to the Gospel as it engages with individuals and couples. Welcoming all women and men who turn to it, and the gestures of blessing that it can offer from God, are ways of declaring the good news that he first loves us, and passing on his call to live in relationship with him.

1.3. "Bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing" (1 Peter 3:9): this exhortation from Peter's epistle reminds us that to bless is a source of blessing, both for the receiver and the giver.

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1.4. The United Protestant Church of France, experiencing this blessing and inviting others to do so, seeks to be attentive to the aspirations of its contemporaries, whilst also remaining watchful and analytical. Without casting Scripture as the letter of some immutable law, it intends to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to his high calling, the ground of its faith and its hope.

2. Blessing: an unconditional welcome by God, a promise of his presence and a call to live by the Gospel

2.1. By declaring to one another afresh the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ, the grace of God symbolised by the act of blessing causes us to look beyond ourselves and frees us from any desire to justify ourselves. It calls us to allow this love to transform our lives, bringing them in tune with the Gospel. According to the Bible, blessing involves a welcome, a promise and a commission; retaining only one of these three aspects would not be a faithful representation of the essential impetus of blessing.

2.2. Blessing involves offering a sign and a word that declare the love of God and his presence; it is not the performance of an act of magic that somehow forces God to look favourably on us; neither does it imply his approval of our plans. Since it refers to the one who makes all things new and encourages trust in him, blessing is a genuine source of peace and hope, opening up the future and guiding the dynamic of a renewed life.

2.3. To be blessed is a gift made by grace, to be received in faith; it is a call to embrace the joys of life with gratitude and a bulwark to help bear our trials with courage and confidence.

2.4. For blessing attests to the presence of God with us in our failures as in our successes, in our times of confident progress and when we go astray. It does not make us immune from the uncertainties of human life, nor from the risks involved in our undertakings, nor from our responsibilities, but upholds our confidence in the kindness of God.

3. Walking together

3.1. On the basis of this understanding of blessing, the national Synod therefore calls on believers, parishes and local Churches, to appropriate for themselves this gift of God and to continue examining their own practices in the matter of blessing.

3.2. The United Protestant Church of France confesses that the fellowship of the Church is a gift of God that should always be embraced. It intends to implement this gift by walking in fellowship as the Scriptures attest. Legitimate diversity must not be confused with a juxtaposition of individual convictions and practices (which would merely be plurality), nor must the unity of the Church be understood as simply imposing a single conviction and practice on all (uniformity). Fellowship is a way of living together as a Church, vitalising our differences through the interest we take in them, in a climate of trust and gratitude as brothers and sisters, the different children of the same heavenly Father. Opening up a way together therefore involves considering, precisely as a blessing, the fact that God also speaks to us through our differences.

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3.3. In particular, fellowship is established through the shared reading of Bible passages. The diversity of our interpretations nurtures and enriches our faith, provided these are founded on the shared conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord.

3.4. In this spirit, the Synod is glad that practical and sometimes sensitive questions concerning the blessing of individuals and couples have been examined and discussed in local Churches and regional Synods. It does not feel the need to establish uniform practice for blessing, but calls on local Churches and parishes to welcome differences as a challenge and an asset even as they continue dialogue, internally and between each other, in a spirit of fellowship.

3.5. Similarly, the Synod is persuaded that this fellowship must be lived out in dialogue with other Churches, in particular within the French Protestant Federation. It rests on us all being rooted in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, over and above different practices regarding inclusion of and engagement with individuals and couples.

4. Blessing in a Church setting

4.1. Attentive to the desire of many of our contemporaries to see God's unconditional kindness demonstrated to them in the practical outworking of their lives, in their trials and joys, the Synod invites local parishes and Churches, and ministers, to fully exercise their pastoral responsibility with regard to such persons,

- by welcoming, with kindness and in all seriousness, the widely diverse individuals and couples who approach them with the desire to place their lives before the God of Jesus Christ
- by engaging with them in their efforts to discern God's intentions for them
- and by exploring the possible avenues for the blessing of God to be imparted to them within the Church.

4.2. In particular, parishes and local Churches have considered the request made by a number of same-sex couples that are members of our Church for a blessing to be said over them on the occasion of their civil wedding.

4.2.1. The Synod has noted the various positions that have been expressed within the United Protestant Church during the synodical process, as has also been the case in other Churches. It affirms that these differences should in no way call fellowship into question, since this is founded in Jesus Christ and not in unanimous convictions.

We all see in the Scriptures the joy of a commitment to live out love that respects the other person. In such cases, blessing bears witness to God's "yes" to love between two individuals that becomes a covenant, an undertaking, a pathway and a promise.

Furthermore, we all receive the testimony of the Scriptures, which make faithful love between a man and a woman a parable for God's faithfulness for his people. However, we do not all draw the same conclusions: some hold that only such couples can be liturgically blessed, while others consider that God's blessing is not bound up with sexual orientation.

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4.2.2. The Synod is keen both to allow same-sex couples to feel welcomed as they are, and to respect the differing viewpoints across the United Protestant Church. It hereby opens the possibility, for women and men who see therein a proper way of bearing witness to the Gospel, to practice a liturgical blessing of married couples of the same sex who wish to place their covenant before God.

5. Coordinating our practice

5.1. In order to enjoy fellowship to the full, it is worth giving ourselves the means to coordinate our practices in the matter of blessing same-sex couples, both within local Churches and parishes and between them.

5.2. Liturgical blessings, a matter of pastoral discernment, cannot be performed without a dialogue within the local church eldership (*Conseil presbytéral*). While the minister (or holder of a preaching mandate) is bound to professional secrecy as regards specific cases, including with respect to the eldership, for a first request and with a view to the full exercise of their ministry of unity, they shall be required to agree on the principle of such liturgical blessings with their eldership.

5.3. The Synod hereby resolves to create, firstly, a “Blessings resource commission”, and secondly a “Blessings liturgy commission”.

5.3.1. Blessings resource commission:

5.3.1.1. This commission shall be comprised of five to seven members, appointed by the national Council.

5.3.1.2. It shall be responsible for supporting any local Churches and parishes that so desire in their thinking and decision-making. It may also propose to intervene, if the regional Council considers it appropriate.

It may be consulted by a minister (or preaching mandate-holder) seeking to have someone with them to discern the best way forward in a given case; the members of the team involved in any such case shall be bound by professional secrecy.

5.3.2. Blessings liturgical team:

5.3.2.1. This team shall be made up of five to seven members appointed by the national Council.

5.3.2.2. It shall be responsible for collecting, developing and circulating liturgical resources concerning the blessing of same-sex couples on the occasion of their wedding. These materials may be used on a temporary basis, until a draft liturgy informed by a few years’ experience has been brought before the synods. Pro tem, any liturgy for any such blessing shall be developed in dialogue with this team.

6. Commissioning

The Synod exhorts local Churches and parishes to exercise the freedom of the children of God in this manner, caring for one another in a spirit of kind-heartedness and fellowship.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, let us dare to trust one another and trust in the God of Jesus Christ, who blesses us and calls on us to bless.