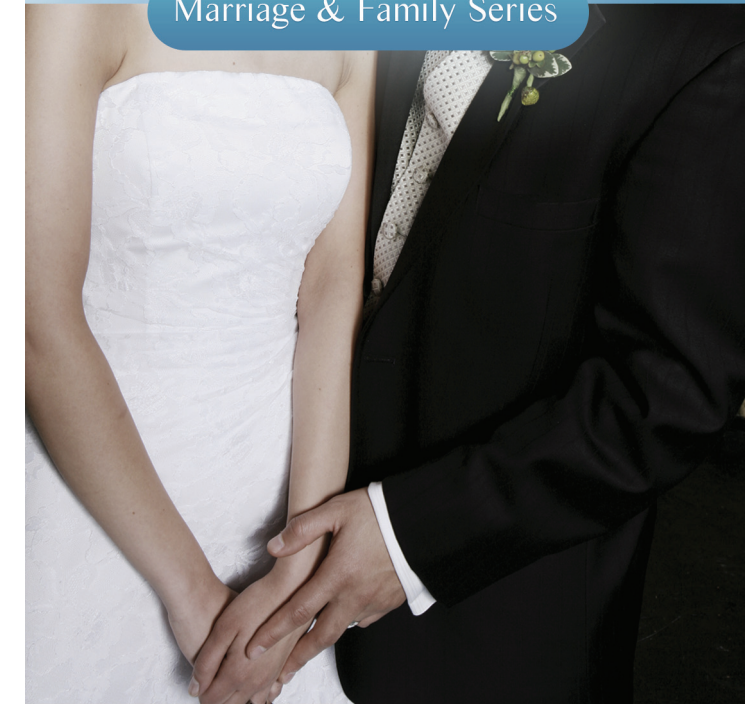


Making Our Weddings Christian

Marriage & Family Series



the events of the day should be pleasing in his sight since he is there in the front row at the wedding and during the reception at the head table.

Location Less Important

Covenants in the Bible appear to have been made in various locations. The location does not seem to have been as critical as the recognition that God was involved. While Christians have traditionally celebrated marriages inside church buildings, certainly God's presence can be easily acknowledged in other settings, too (e.g., homes, gardens, etc.). On the other hand, the practice of being married in a church building with its shared memories, surrounded by a community of friends and relatives, should not be quickly dismissed.

Symbols Carefully Chosen

In biblical covenants, symbolic actions were often used to demonstrate the significance of the event. A pillar might be set up as a remembrance (Josh. 24:26), a sacrifice given (Ex. 24:5-8), or some ritual using salt enacted (2 Chron. 13:5). In more recent times, wedding symbols (a candle ceremony, exchange of rings, white dress, "giving away" the bride, etc.) have played a prominent role. Some of these symbols can continue to carry significant meaning while others may need revision. Should "giving the bride away" be replaced by a "parental blessing," for example? Symbols should not be adopted simply because they are traditional, nor should they be rejected simply because they have been used so often. The couple and the officiating minister should examine each symbol and determine whether it communicates clearly what they want it to say.

In some circles, it is becoming popular to include a communion service as part of the ceremony to symbolize the centrality of God in the ceremony and the oneness of the new couple in Christ. Mennonite Brethren churches discourage this practice, mainly because it conflicts with the understanding that communion is an ordinance of the church as the body of Christ. They believe a communion service is not appropriate for a wedding ceremony where

a number of guests may not be followers of Christ. Inviting them to an event and then discouraging them from participating in a part of the event seems very awkward. And if only the wedding couple (or with them the officiating minister) participate, they are acting against the biblical understanding of communion as representation of the body of Christ. In the light of these objections, it does not seem advisable to combine a communion service with a wedding ceremony.

Overall, a Christian wedding should be characterized by joy, worship, simplicity, community, love, and dignity. Although the Bible does not spell out a specific order of service or describe exactly what should be included in the vows, the biblical theology of marriage gives clear insights to guide our decisions. There is room for creativity and personality in the wedding ceremony and reception but each guest should leave with the unmistakable impression that the couple has made a mature covenant with each other before God. They should be drawn to a God who celebrates with the couple and who promises to sustain their love and life together. ■

For additional reading: Schulz, D. & Dick, M.: *Following the Call: A Leadership Manual for Mennonite Brethren Church* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1998), a resource for pastors. Stevens, R. Paul: *Married for Good* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986); very good on the concept of covenant in marriage. Webber, R.: *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993) has a chapter on the theology/meaning of marriage and sample wordings for wedding ceremonies.

Written by Ken Esau, who has taught Old Testament and marriage and family courses at Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, B.C..

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Published by the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Board of Faith and Life. For additional copies, contact: Canadian Conference of MB Churches, 1310 Taylor Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3M 3Z6. Call toll-free: 1.888.669.6575.



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Faith and Life

Making Our Weddings Christian

Wedding ceremonies were once extremely predictable. From the “Dearly beloved” to the “Do you take...?” to the “I do,” there were few surprises. Today, however, things have changed.

Our legal system recognizes the changes. In many places in North America, no specific words or actions are required for someone to be legally married. As long as two individuals of legal age freely sign the legal document in the presence of a licensed individual, they are married.

Christians face the question, what exactly constitutes a “Christian” wedding? The word “Christian” implies following after Christ or being Christ-like. While the Bible gives us many clues about what that might mean, there is no one, explicit prescription for a God-honouring ceremony.

Marriage is introduced in Genesis in response to the observation that “it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him” (2:18, NIV). Adam marvels that the woman is clearly an appropriate companion and we read the words, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). A God-honouring marriage involves “leaving” behind a primary loyalty to parents and anything else that might hinder this new relationship. Being “united” is all about growing together in a deeply bonded relationship. And, finally, a God-honouring marriage involves becoming “one flesh,” the joining of two lives into one in sexual intimacy.

The Bible uses the word “covenant” to describe the loyalty that lasts until the death of one of the partners. Covenant is the highest type of relationship one can find in the Bible. It describes God’s relationship with us through Christ. Christ’s loyalty and sacrifice (“Never will I leave you, never

will I forsake you,” Heb. 13:5) stands as a model of what is at the heart of the marriage relationship. A God-honouring wedding should show the realities of what the Bible teaches us about marriage and covenants. The following suggestions may help us gain some biblical perspectives for a Christian wedding.

Weddings are Worship Events

It is God who created marriage. He made the person who will be an appropriate companion for us. It is God who is the prime witness to the covenant (Mal. 2:14). It is God who is the ultimate example of covenant loyalty.

While our culture has often made a wedding the bride’s day, it is really God’s, and he is honoured when a bride and groom commit themselves in loyalty and purity to a new life together as long as “they both shall live.” A wedding is a worship event.

Every part of a wedding ceremony should be evaluated by how it fits into this larger sense of worship. Take music, for example. Some of the music should certainly recognize the role that God plays in this special day. None of it should trivialize the covenant relationship. Does this leave any room for secular music? While not all lyrics mention God, certainly some do speak of a Christ-like, compassionate, and enduring love without making it sound too simplistic and could well be appropriate for the day. Not all poetry of the Bible explicitly mentions God, either (e.g., Song of Songs), yet it stands firmly in the midst of more “religious” writings.

Weddings Have Cosmic Meaning

The Israelites sealed their covenants with the holy name of God—Yahweh. Even when the Gibeonites lied to them and tricked them into a covenant, God did not allow the Israelites to break their covenant, because it had been made in his name (Josh. 9:18, 19). A wedding is a cosmic event, much larger than simply two people talking to each other. God is present and the covenant is witnessed by heaven and earth alike. Wedding ceremonies should always

be planned to reflect this cosmic significance. They should never be allowed to be crowded between two innings in a baseball game or placed before something else seen as the main event. The wedding ceremony is the main event and nothing should be allowed to trivialize its central place.

Because of this cosmic nature, weddings should be carefully planned. Pre-marital counselling is one form of preparation that should be considered by all couples anticipating their wedding day.

Vows are the Centre of the Event

In biblical covenant-making, we hear little of what the parties wore. We have few records that detail the meal at the reception, but the nature of the commitment is central (e.g., Gen. 31:48-54). While the beauty of the event, the decorations, and so on help to make it special, the vows themselves are what make the day. The vows should reflect careful thought and be given a central place in the ceremony.

While the writing of personal vows is common today, these vows need to encompass the basic elements of a covenant. It would be a tragedy to give the impression that we are at a Christian wedding and then incorporate vows that are non-covenantal. Paul Stevens of Regent College, in his book *Married for Good*, has identified these covenantal components as: exclusive (“I take you”), relational (“to be my wife/ husband”), total (“to have and to hold”), indissoluble (“for better, for worse... until death parts us”), sacred (“according to God’s law”), and awesome (“and this is my solemn vow”). While there is room for many different ways of expressing these personal vows, they should include all of the elements.

Theologically, a couple is married after these vows are spoken before God and witnesses. In provinces where the legal register is signed as part of the ceremony, the church recognizes that the couple is already married and the government also recognizes what has just happened.

Weddings are Community Events

Witnesses are a normal part of covenant-making in the Bible. Witnesses encourage covenant partners to maintain their part of the covenant. In the case of God’s covenants with humanity, often the heavens and the earth were the only appropriate witnesses (Deut. 30:19). They encouraged Israel by providing rain and good crops when God’s people were faithful and they also encouraged repentance when Israel was disloyal (Deut. 28:12, 38-42).

Weddings involve the community not simply as audience or spectators but also as witnesses who commit themselves to encourage and pray for the new couple and provide some level of accountability. While not all guests may be able to practise this role, certainly the bridesmaids and groomsmen should thoughtfully consider how they could function more as true witnesses.

Weddings are Celebration Events

Eating together, a common component of covenant-making (Gen. 31:54), demonstrates the tone of the event. Joy should be the prevailing mood. The celebratory joy should come from the event and

not from the extravagance of the flowers, location, or reception, though all these can add to the enjoyment. Ideally, guests should remember the strength and maturity of the couple as they committed themselves to one another and praised the awesome God who brought them together. Simplicity is more likely

to keep the focus of the celebration on people and God rather than on the less important.

Receptions today follow in the tradition of covenant meals in biblical times. Eating together showed that the new covenant partners were related in a new way. The reception should express the joyous tone of the day and recognize that Jesus is the honoured guest for the entire day. Both the ceremony and reception should recognize his central place. All

► continued on reverse

A wedding is a cosmic event. God is present and the covenant is witnessed by heaven and earth alike.