

THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY: A CORNERSTONE IN BUILDING GODLY FAMILIES

by Tim Bayly

Recently Miss Manners took pastors to task for a lackadaisical approach to wedding ceremonies:

In a house of worship, which figure represents the higher authority—the presiding member of the clergy or the wedding coordinator?

Miss Manners would not have thought this to be a particularly thorny protocol question. She would be mistaken. Everyone gets the answer wrong.

The wedding coordinator, whether she is in the business professionally or for the purpose of being married, thinks it is she. And if the clerics don't actually voice agreement, an amazing number of them behave as if they regretfully believe this to be the case.

"There's nothing we can do," they wail when admitting that some of the arrangements strike them as being undignified, if not sacrilegious. "That's what people want nowadays."

Well, sure. People want to commit all kinds of sins, not just against etiquette, but that doesn't mean that the clergy must condone it. They themselves may be tempted to do the wrong thing for the noble sake of accruing income or popularity for their congregations, but they are supposed to resist temptation...!

Scripture presents us few accounts of weddings in Biblical times, yet consider what this record of the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac says concerning Christian marriage:

Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?"

And the servant said, "He is my master."

Then she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death (Gen. 24:63-67).

Commenting on this text, Matthew Henry wrote, "Rebekah behaved herself very becomingly, when she met Isaac: understanding who he was, she alighted off her camel, and took a veil, and covered herself, in token of humility, modesty, and subjection."

Similarly Calvin wrote, "Moses also says that she took a veil: which was a token of shame and modesty. For hence also, the Latin word which signifies to marry, is derived, because it was the custom to give brides veiled to their husbands. That the same rite was also observed by the fathers, I have no doubt. So much the more shameful, and the less

¹ Judith Martin, "In Church Weddings, Who's in Charge?" in *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 11, 2001.

capable of excuse, is the licentiousness of our own age; in which the apparel of brides seems to be purposely contrived for the subversion of all modesty.”²

What a contrast to our own wedding culture in which brides seem to compete with one another for the dubious honor of having the largest bridal party, the lowest-cut bodice, or the cutest flower girl. I remember the day I stood in my living room laughing at the sight of a stretch limousine getting a jump start from an old trashy Pinto parked nose to nose in the church driveway; what pastor does not feel the need for relief from the conspicuous consumption which overwhelms our weddings?

And yet, if the spiritual graces of modesty, submission, and fidelity are missing from our ceremonies, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Pastors must reckon with the fact that we are responsible for the abandonment of those timeless elements of wedding liturgies which led the bride and groom, their families, and all those assembled, to think sober thoughts about God’s commands concerning marriage, and to plead for His grace to fulfill those commands. In such a climate, is it any wonder so many of our marriages end in dissolution?

The wisdom that God gave the church in past centuries can help us regarding marriage ceremonies today. For hundreds of years, pastors have presided over wedding ceremonies in such a way that the God Who instituted marriage was honored and His Word proclaimed. Great care was taken to “tie the knot” with precision and nothing was left to chance. By their habituation to the words of the liturgy, each successive generation was reminded of God’s timeless truths governing this union of man and wife.

Let us examine parts of the wedding ceremony most frequently used across the English-speaking world for almost five centuries, now. This ceremony was assembled from several sources, including the thirteenth century Sarum Rite, by Anglican Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.³ First published in 1549 in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the ceremony’s content finds an echo in Baptist service books as well as the truncated garden ceremonies which are a staple of Hollywood movies.

THE FORM OF SOLEMNIZATION OF MATRIMONY⁴

Instructions: First the banns must be published three Sundays, during the time of the morning or evening service, the people being present, after the accustomed manner. And if the persons that would be married dwell in different parishes, the

² “There is evidence...the veiling of the bride was part of the marriage ceremony. In Akkadian the bride on her wedding day is called *kallatu kutumtu*, ‘the veiled bride.’” (Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, [Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989], p.170.) Also, “Rebekah, as soon as she saw the man in the field coming to meet them, sprang from the camel to receive him, according to Oriental custom, in the most respectful manner.” (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., vol. 1: *The Pentateuch*, tr. J. Martin, 3 vols. repr. in 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973] 1:261.)

³ Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) pp. 134-152.

⁴ Text is a compilation of texts from <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/BCP_1549.htm> and <<http://www.recus.org/BCP/1662bcp.htm>>. For readability, words and spelling have been altered.

banns must be published in both parishes, and the Curate of the one parish shall not solemnize matrimony between them, without a certificate of the banns being three times published by the Curate of the other parish, also. At the day appointed for Solemnization of Matrimony, the persons to be married shall come into the body of the church, with their friends and neighbors. And there the priest shall thus say...

Place and Time:

It is clearly stated at the beginning that this wedding is not secret or clandestine; the bride and groom will take their vows with both God and the assembled congregation as their witnesses, and future violations of those vows will carry the weight of condemnation those witnesses imply. In fact, Malachi 2:14 reminds us that “the Lord was witness” in the marriage covenant “between you and the wife of your youth.”

However, throughout the Middle Ages, men and women sought to avoid bringing their marital unions under public scrutiny. Entering into secret matrimonial agreements or “clandestine” marriages for a variety of reasons, some wanted to avoid the public scrutiny implied by the reading of the banns, knowing their choice of spouse was forbidden by the laws of incest or consanguinity. (The “banns” were public announcements of an intended marriage.) Others sought to escape accountability for past promises of marriage to a man or woman other than their intended. Still others wished simply to avoid the expense of throwing a large party for those in attendance.

Whatever the reason, both informal promises of marriage and clandestine wedding ceremonies were the cause of endless conflict, and both civil and ecclesiastical authorities did their best to bring such practices to an end. Consider the following statement by John Donne from a wedding sermon he preached in 1621: “As marriage is a civil contract, it must be done so in public, as that it may have the testimony of men. As marriage is a religious contract, it must be done so as it may have the benediction of the priest. (Without public testimony and religious benediction it) is but regulated adultery, it is not marriage.”⁵

A proper wedding was held only after the banns had been published three consecutive weeks within both communities where the bride and groom resided, thus giving those knowing of any impediments to the marriage ample opportunity to come forward. If they had missed these opportunities, the liturgy of the wedding itself provided them one final moment to speak, or forever hold their peace.

There were pastors and priests who, for a fee, were willing to officiate at clandestine weddings. Larger cities like London offered such anonymity with clergy known to be accommodating. Even local clergy were known, at times and for a certain fee, to turn a blind eye to marriages early in the morning or late at night, away from the community’s prying eyes, but they officiated at some risk to their position since clandestine weddings violated church law.

⁵ As quoted in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 295.

Weddings were public affairs, involving not simply the union of one man and one woman, but two extended families and their respective communities; the bride and groom were to wed in such a way as to assure the health and continuity, not just of their own home and immediate family, but also the church and civic community.

To this day there is no doubt that elopement produces a valid marriage, but at considerable risk to the future well-being of the married couple and their children: the bride and groom are intentionally avoiding the choreography surrounding wedding days, a large part of which is intended to assure the greatest chance of a harmonious union of two family systems and their respective communities. For all the jokes made at the expense of the mother of the bride, there will be no escaping her after the ceremony and weddings present an excellent opportunity to work through the first tensions of this marriage in a context assuring the greatest possible success. Invitations have been sent out, gifts have been purchased, vacation dates have been altered, and think of how embarrassing it would be to postpone or cancel the big event.

Demonstrating, again, that the wedding ceremony united whole communities and not only the groom and his bride, many of the early reformers (including Calvin, Knox, and the first Scottish *Book of Worship*) placed the wedding in the context of the corporate worship of the Lord's Day, just before the sermon.⁶ So too, Cranmer begins the ceremony with the simple instruction that "the persons to be married shall come into the body of the church, with their friends and neighbors," and all things are done "in the sight of God, and in the face of his congregation."

DEARLY beloved friends, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of his congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate instituted of God in paradise, in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and his Church: which holy estate, Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle in Cana of Galilee, and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men; and therefore is not to be entered into, nor taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding: but reverently, discretely, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.

Words of Institution:

As is common practice with Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the wedding ceremony also begins with a recitation of the Biblical precedents for this worship service, and in each case this Biblical basis is referred to as the "words of institution." Although the reformed fathers rejected the Sacramental status claimed for marriage by the Roman Catholic church, Protestant weddings continued to be held in church,⁷ introduced by a short summary of marriage's Scriptural warrant.

⁶ Stevenson, p. 130.

⁷ Some small number of Protestants sought to deny the Church any role in weddings, but the overwhelming testimony of the Church has been that it is proper for couples to repeat their vows within the Body of

“Matrimony...is an honorable estate instituted of God in paradise, in the time of man’s innocency.” Thus it is part of God’s perfect plan, not some second-rate compromise arising from the Fall. What an excellent theme to strike in a day when marriage is being redefined under civil law such that its permanence and heterosexuality are denied! By pointing the assembled congregation back to the institution of marriage in “paradise” when man was in his “innocency,” we are reminded that marriage has, from the beginning, been heterosexual, and that all of marriage’s attributes are binding across time because they are not the product of sin, but graceful gifts from the Father Who sends “rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

Neither heterosexuality nor life-long monogamy nor the headship of the husband are principles binding on God’s covenant people alone; rather, having been instituted in the Garden of Eden, they are binding on all mankind. And although we certainly cannot expect those without the Spirit of God to demonstrate in their marriages the selfless and sacrificial love of Christ for His Church, we may not give in to efforts today to strip marriage of its constituent features ordained by God. The French poet, Charles Peguy, wrote “We will never know how many acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of seeming not sufficiently progressive.”⁸

Monogamous, life-long, heterosexual, husband-led marriage is binding on all people and nations, and Christian judges, legislators and citizens must work, not only to protect these truths from the encroachments of civil law, but also to proclaim them unashamedly in the public square as faithful witnesses to our Lord and His Truth.

Warning:

By warning against the “carnal lust and appetites (of) brute beasts,” the liturgy reminds those assembled that man bears God’s image, and that this once-in-a-lifetime step of marriage is to be taken only with the greatest caution and in the “fear of God.” There are times to remind Christians of the Father’s authority and of the consequences of dealing lightly with His Law. Scripture warns us concerning the danger of taking vows lightly⁹ and marriage vows today need, again, to be taken in the context of Scripture’s warning, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

Too many weddings held in evangelical churches are characterized more by flippancy, romanticism, and sentimentality than by the sobriety and reverence here commended. Certainly there is a time and place for joyous celebration, but anyone married for more than a few days recognizes how much those taking vows need to have impressed upon them the responsibilities and duties which, from this point forward, will be their constant

Christ, with a pastor officiating and asking for God’s blessing. Cf. Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997) pp. 44-45, 55, passim.

⁸ As quoted by Joe Sobran in *SOBRAN’S—The Real News of the Month*, August 2001, Volume 8, No. 8

⁹ “When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not be slack to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin in you. But if you refrain from vowing, it shall be no sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth” (Deuteronomy 23:21-23, RSV).

companions. This worship service ought to be characterized by sober reminders of God's transcendent attributes, and of our necessary dependence upon Him for faithfulness.

As the bride and groom recess, let the partying begin, and let it be every bit as warm and joyful as that wedding in Cana attended by our Lord. And while joy is present in the ceremony also, the principal note struck there should be a holy reverence as we meditate on the nature of the vows being taken. So let us fall on our knees before God acknowledging our sinfulness and pleading with him to give us the grace to obey what He commands.

Duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained. One cause was the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and praise of God. Secondly it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication, that such persons as be married, might live chastely in matrimony, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body. Thirdly for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined.

Three Purposes of Marriage:

Part of a wise and reverent approach to marriage leads, here in the ceremony, to a recitation of God's intent for this institution. Historically, the Church has recognized three purposes taught in Scripture, and these purposes have appeared in Protestant statements of faith down through the centuries. Here they are summarized by the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.¹⁰

It's discouraging to see how many contemporary marriage ceremonies lack any statement of these purposes. In the past, one of these purposes was occasionally left out of the liturgy, but this was not due to any opposition to the Biblical basis of that purpose; rather, certain ecclesiastical leaders, squeamish about explicit references to sexuality, left the "preventing of uncleanness" unstated.¹¹ But even then, no one would have thought of leaving out of the liturgy all mention of the purposes to which God ordained marriage. There is a different kind of attack on the purposes of marriage today, though, and this attack seems to have staying power.

Back while serving as a pastor within the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA), I was studying our *Book of Confessions* and discovered that the *Westminster Confession's* chapter on marriage had been altered; in 1953, all reference to "the increase of

¹⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith* XIV:2.

¹¹ Stevenson, pp. 151-152.

mankind...and the Church with an holy seed” had been deleted.¹² Since making this discovery, I’ve often wondered whether our reluctance to rehearse the Biblical purposes of marriage might not be tied up with our uneasiness over the place of fertility in God’s plan for sexuality?

For decades, Christians have been harangued for their purported belief that the only legitimate purpose of sexual intimacy is procreation, and many scholars have claimed that our Church fathers believed sex to be dirty. Add to this the secular pressures to lower fertility in the face of the threat of overpopulation, and Christians have too often abandoned any mention of God’s command given in the Garden of Eden, after the Flood to Noah, and later to Israel, to “be fruitful and multiply.”¹³

We need never be ashamed of God’s Truth, least of all in this area where man’s wisdom has so clearly been disproved. It is widely acknowledged that the true threat facing the Western world today is under-population, and no one is ready to make a prediction exactly where and when the fertility rate will cease its precipitous decline.¹⁴ A recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly* began with these words, “Fifty years from now the world’s population will be declining, with no end in sight.... This view is coming to be widely accepted among population experts, even as the public continues to focus on the threat of uncontrolled population growth.”¹⁵

It is God’s good plan that sex not be thought of, principally, as a legitimate way to get a rush, but rather as God’s way of bringing man and wife to the point of greatest unity and, through that unity, propagating (for Himself) a “godly seed” (Mal. 2:15, KJV). Thus fertility rightfully holds its own as one of the three purposes of marriage revealed in the Bible, and pastors cannot go wrong repeating each of these purposes during marriage ceremonies.

Therefore if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined so together: Let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.

And also speaking to the persons that shall be married, he shall say:

I REQUIRE and charge you (as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed) that if either of you do know any

¹² In 1983, the breach between northern and southern Presbyterians caused by the Civil War was healed. The two branches reunited, taking the name “Presbyterian Church (USA).” One curiosity produced by that reunion was the new denomination issuing a new *Book of Confessions* in which the *Westminster Confession’s* chapter on marriage was broken into two parallel columns, one listing all three historic purposes for marriage, while the other column listed only two. It was the column inherited from the northern Presbyterians which lacked the purpose of procreation.

¹³ Genesis 1:22,28; 8:17; 9:1,7; 35:11.

¹⁴ “...the British economist Thomas Malthus’s prediction that population growth is bound to outrun food production, condemning societies to perpetual misery and starvation, is much more than plain wrong. It has been an enduring source of error and self-bamboozlement for almost every day of the 201 years since the young Malthus hit on the idea...” From Nicholas Wade, “Why Malthus Was Mistaken,” in *New York Times*, Sunday, September 19, 1999, p. WK 5.

¹⁵ Max Singer, “The Population Surprise,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1999, pp. 22-25.

impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, that ye confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many as be coupled together otherwise than God's word doth allow: are not joined of God, neither is their matrimony lawful.

At which day of marriage if any man does allege any impediment why (the bride and groom) may not be coupled together in matrimony; And will be bound, and sureties with him, to the parties, or else put in a caution to the full value of such charges as the persons to be married do thereby sustain to prove his allegation: then the Solemnization must be deferred, until such time as the truth be tried.¹⁶

Final Reading of the Banns:

The pastor here gives one last opportunity for “impediments” to the marriage to be brought forward with the sober warning that, although such impediments may be hidden to the eye of man, God sees all and any hidden matter—such as a prior private promise of marriage given to someone other than their intended—will become clear on the “dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed.”

Why is a similar warning not given today? Is it because fornication is absent from our congregations? Is it because young men and women no longer promise life-long love as a prelude to their stolen pleasures? Is it because promises no longer matter?

Regardless of the reason, as a pastor approaches the liturgy and sees these strange words which insert such an ominous and foreboding note into a happy day, it is the work of a moment to delete this from the order of worship, to everyone's intense relief. Who in their right mind actually expects a bride or groom to announce a prior covenant which prevents the taking of a new one; and who wishes on any bride the fate of Jane Eyre who, standing at the altar, finds out that her groom is already married?

From Hollywood's rather limited romantic perspective, this section of the liturgy has no purpose other than to give true love one last opportunity to speak or forever hold its peace. So, at the conclusion of *While You Were Sleeping* we all breathed a sigh of relief when Sandra Bullock avoided a loveless marriage, marrying her true love instead.

Lest there be any confusion, though, the celebrant goes on to warn the congregation that any bride and groom joined “otherwise than God's word doth allow: are not joined of God, neither is their matrimony lawful.” During either the rehearsal or wedding proper, it is my habit to add a simple explanation to this part of the liturgy, that no matter what the legislators and judges of any particular state or country have decreed, it is the law of God—not man—which is the final word concerning the legality of any marriage. In our day of no-fault divorce and homosexual “covenantal unions,” a reminder that civil laws are subordinate to the laws of God is timely and wise.

If no impediment be alleged, then shall the Curate say unto the man:

¹⁶ The one bringing forth the accusation against the legality of the marriage must be willing to bear the cost of postponement, should his appeal not be sustained.

N. WILT thou have this woman to (be) thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health? And forsaking all others keep thee only to her, so long as you both shall live?

The man shall answer:

I will.

Then shall the Curate say to the woman:

N. Wilt thou have this man to (be) thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance, in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health? And forsaking all others keep thee only to him, so long as you both shall live?

The woman shall answer:

I will.

Declaration of Consent:

It always seemed to me that vows are exchanged twice during the wedding liturgy; first, here where the bride and groom are asked whether they will have each other; then again, a few minutes later. Why the duplication of promises?

Over the centuries, weddings were seen to consist of three non-negotiable elements: parental approval, the free consent of the groom and bride to the impending marriage, and the giving and receiving of promises which finalized the marriage. Other elements were added and subtracted, as need be, but these three remained constant. Generally speaking, parental permission and the free consent of groom and bride were a function of the betrothal, whereas the giving and receiving of promises were the marriage proper, immediately following which the marriage was consummated.

It was between betrothal and marriage that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary conceived, and throughout the Middle Ages it was typical for betrothal to precede marriage by somewhere around twelve months. What has happened to the betrothal ceremony today?

It's been compressed onto the wedding ceremony proper, taking the form of what we now refer to as the declaration of consent when the bride and groom are both asked whether they are entering into this marriage of their own free will, fully intending to tie the knot? The major difference between the declaration of consent and the vows proper, is that the former is answered in the future tense, whereas the latter is answered in the present. In the first case the bride and groom respond "I will;" in the second, "I do."

Thus, until recently the process of the establishment of the consent of the parents to the coming marriage, as well as the man and woman contracting together to exchange vows at some future date, had been known as betrothal. More recently, though, betrothal has been broken down into two parts: first, 'engagement' where the stakes are much lower

than betrothal; and second, the declaration of consent which now is clamped onto the front end of the marriage ceremony itself.

Then shall the Minister say:

Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?

Transfer of Authority:

There is evident irony in the continued asking of the question “Who gives this woman to be married to this man” in weddings today, and although we think we’ve dealt with this archaism by the father replying, “Her mother and I do,” the question itself runs cross grain to our individualist, egalitarian ethos. After all, why ought anyone to give away the bride, but not the groom?

As in many parts of the liturgy, here too past generations transfer to us their Biblical understanding that father-rule is at the heart of the Christian home. Father Abraham sent his servant off to find a wife for his son, Isaac, and the law of Moses decreed that fathers and husbands had veto power over the vows of their daughters and wives (see Num. 30:1-9).

Such laws made it impossible for a daughter to contract her own marriage against her father’s will, and still to this day when a father gives his daughter’s hand in marriage with the words, “Her mother and I do,” whether consciously or not, he is illustrating to the assembled congregation his Biblical headship. From this moment on, the father’s authority is transferred to the new man in his daughter’s life, her husband, who will be the ‘head’¹⁷ of her new home.

Summing up the essential elements of Jewish marriage contracts from the fifth century B.C., Collins writes, “The contract was formally an agreement between the groom and the person with authority over the bride...(and) marriage contracts were settled with the father or person in authority even when the bride was mature.”¹⁸ Similarly, during the Middle Ages: “The woman was ‘given’ in marriage by her father or by an adult male friend, in a silent but potent symbolic transfer of authority.”¹⁹ The Puritan divine, Richard Greenham, thought this part of the liturgy “a laudable custom in the church and a tolerable ceremony...both to show his authority over her and to witness his consent in bestowing her.”²⁰

While it may not pay to quibble over the wording of the transfer since, in a real sense, the mother of the bride is also relinquishing—indeed, must relinquish—her authority over her daughter from the time of the wedding on, it is worth calling attention to the bridal

¹⁷ For a helpful discussion of the significance of the Greek word translated ‘head’ in Ephesians 5, see Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of *Kephalē* (“Head”): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001) pp. 25-65.

¹⁸ John J. Collins, “Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, edited by Leo Purdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John Collins, and Carol Meyers, (Westminster John Knox, Louisville: 1997) pp. 108-109.

¹⁹ Cressey, p. 337.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 340.

party that these words have Biblical precedent and communicate important Scriptural truths concerning both the necessity and nature of authority in the Christian home. And in this connection, has it not been heartening to all those with Biblical commitments to see a renewal of the practice of men going to the father of their intended, requesting his daughter's hand in marriage even before securing the agreement of his beloved and placing a ring on her finger?

It's interesting to note that the Reformers commonly referred to the necessity of parental or "paternal" permission for marriage in their exposition of the Fifth Commandment. For instance, note this question addressed by Turretin under his exposition of the Fifth Commandment: "The question is can children shake off the subjection and obedience due to parents and withdraw themselves from paternal authority? ... We deny it."²¹

And the minister receiving the woman at her father or friend's hands: shall cause the man to take the woman by the right hand, and so either to give their troth to other: The man first saying:

I N. take thee N. to (be) my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, to love and to cherish, until death us depart: according to God's holy ordinance: And thereto I plight thee my troth.²²

Then shall they loose their hands, and the woman taking again the man by the right hand shall say:

I N. take thee N. to (be) my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us depart: according to God's holy ordinance: And thereto I give thee my troth.

Exchange of Vows:

The vows are the heart of the wedding and here, if nowhere else, it's imperative that the bride and groom have a sense that they are not engaging in a romantic act in which creativity is of paramount significance, but rather submitting themselves to the ages and walking in lockstep with those who have gone before. For a couple of decades, now, it has been in vogue for couples to write their own declarations of consent and vows, but such efforts pale in comparison to those bequeathed to us by Cranmer and his predecessors. Consider these promises taken from the weddings of celebrities:²³

_____, do you give yourself totally to loving _____, striving to do whatever you can to help her/him feel happy and secure, treating her/him with kindness, understanding and respect throughout your lives? (Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love)

²¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Authority*, 3 vols., translated by George Musgrave Giger, edited by James T. Dennison, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg NJ: 1994), 2:105.

²² To "plight" means "to promise by a solemn pledge," and "troth" means "faithfulness."

²³ Vows taken from <<http://www.dfwx.com>>.

I _____, take you _____, to be my wedded wife/husband to love and to cherish from this day forward. (Dudley Moore and Heather Thomas)

I, _____, take you _____, for my lawful wife/husband, from this day forward, to have and to hold, as equal partner in my life, to whom I give my deepest love and respect, I humbly open my heart to you as sanctuary of warmth and peace where you may find a refuge of love and strength. (Tom Selleck)

A couple of things may be said about these vows: they are lacking in gravity and they are unisex—one size fits all. Although each one of us has expressed similar sentiments to our own husband or wife, they are understood to be more fitting for birthday and anniversary cards than the taking of matrimonial vows. Sure, we all want to “help our spouse feel happy and secure,” to “treat him with kindness (and) respect” as our “equal partner,” and to “open our heart” to him as a “sanctuary of warmth and peace,” but such sentiment is woefully inadequate to keep the home fires burning through years of living with an alcoholic husband, or a wife who has Alzheimer’s.

No, at such times the meaning of the words “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health...till death us do part” become clear, and nothing else will do.

Since our fathers had both been ordained to the pastoral ministry, my wife and I were pleased to ask them to co-officiate at our wedding ceremony. A day or so before the wedding, my father came to me privately and told me he expected us to promise publicly that we would never consider divorce as an option in our marriage. Then he added that if we were not willing to make this promise, he would withdraw from officiating at the wedding.

Immediately I went to Mary Lee and told her what Dad had said. She responded, “Well, of course we don’t expect to get divorced, but who knows what’s going to happen years from now?”

“Well,” I responded, “unless we make the promise, he won’t marry us.”

That promise was made twenty-five years ago, now, and over the years we have repeated this story many times to couples in troubled marriages. We are so grateful that my father had the wisdom to require us to publicly promise life-long fidelity, committing ourselves never even to consider divorce as an option. Like all marriages, ours has been through troubled times, but no matter how heated the arguments or how deep the moments of despair, because of our public promise we were free from any thoughts or threats of divorce. What stability it has given us to have this whole option simply removed from the table! (And may I add that marriage yields a good number of its greatest treasures only after the passing of decades—not five, ten, or even fifteen years.)

That Word ‘Obey’:

Yet there remains a part of Cranmer’s wedding liturgy which my father never mentioned, and which still to this day is rarely a part of even the most traditional services: I’m

speaking of the insertion of the promise to obey which has, historically, differentiated the bride's declaration of consent and vows from those of the groom.

Ordained to the pastoral ministry in 1983, I had officiated at scores of weddings before I was aware of this differentiation. Then in 1995, I was going through the wedding service with a couple about to be married when the bride, having looked over the liturgy, asked me if I would object to adding a promise to obey her husband to her wedding vows?

Caught flat-footed, I said I'd look into the matter, and so began my study of wedding liturgies. The more I read, the more I became convinced that there simply is no Biblical justification for the removal of the word 'obey' from the bride's declaration of consent and vows. Any summary of Scripture's teaching concerning the duty of the wife and husband, one to the other, must begin with the duty of the husband to "love" his wife, and the duty of the wife to "obey" her husband.

For this reason Christian marriage rites down through history have contained vows for the bride which acknowledged her Biblical duty to honor and obey her husband.

At the request of this Godly young woman, I returned the promise to obey to its rightful place in my wedding liturgy six years ago, and to this day each marriage ceremony I preside over includes the word 'obey' in the bride's vows.

Sermon:

At the end of the liturgy, Cranmer includes a short summary of Scripture's teaching on marriage which the pastor is instructed to read aloud in the event that he has no other sermon prepared. Only six hundred words long, this homily does nothing other than to rehearse Scripture's teaching in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1Peter 3 concerning the duty of husbands to love their wives, and wives to submit to their husbands. What a revolution there would be in the Household of Faith if pastors again proclaimed these Biblical themes with equal simplicity! We ought to feel considerable remorse remembering how often we have exhorted husbands to love their wives while neglecting to mention the bride's concomitant Biblical duty to "reverence," "submit to," and "obey" her husband.

Conclusion:

Think of the explicit commands Moses, speaking for God, gave the sons of Israel concerning their duty to carry on the Passover tradition. Each part of the observance was to be kept intact, but not silently and thoughtlessly—rather, each celebration and each ritual was to be accompanied by a full explanation of that tradition's significance passed on with great intentionality and discipline from father to daughter, father to son to son:

And you shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever. When you enter the land which the LORD will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your children say to you, "What does this rite mean to you?" you shall say, "It is a Passover sacrifice to the

LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes” (Exodus 12:24-27a.).

Today, how are we passing on the truths of God’s Word related to the Divine institution of marriage? Are we keeping the pattern of sound words concerning the solemnity of vows, the wickedness of divorce, the blessing of fertility and children, the duty to honor fathers and mothers, and the specific duties of husbands and wives?

Ask the man in the street what a pastor does and he’ll say, “Marrying, burying, and preaching.” Ask the pastor in the street which of those duties he least enjoys, and he’ll answer “the marrying.” I have two brothers who also are pastors, and my brother, David, has made a habit of asking groups of pastors what their least-favorite task is? He reports most of them answer, “Weddings.” Why?

Because of broken homes; because of ostentation and pride; because of materialism; because of the focus on appearance rather than substance, sentiment rather than truth; because of unrealistic expectations; because weddings are the place where, as much as any other aspect of pastoral ministry, we are asked to do things which infringe upon, or violate, our consciences; because even our preaching is not immune, but suffers under the expectations that everything said during the ceremony will be entirely innocuous.

Yet the difficulty of the task does not excuse the worker from his duty. Given the full-scale assault within our culture against the principal doctrines at the center of this divine institution (fertility, heterosexuality, monogamy, and father-rule), is it any surprise pastors find this aspect of our work so dispiriting and perform our duties in such a lackluster manner?

We must recover a Biblical understanding of marriage, renewing or reforming our wedding ceremonies in such a way that every part of this service aims at the mark of honoring and pleasing God—not man—or more likely, the mother of the bride. Indicating the solemnity of this service in which vows are taken, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man. It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.²⁴

God Himself decreed that it is not good for the man to be alone, and it was He Who made woman from man’s side, to be his helper and to be loved and cherished by him so long as they both shall live. If this love is to survive marriage’s summers, but also its many winters, it must hark back to this hour when the bride and groom both had the honor and dignity, in the presence of God and many witnesses, to place themselves in the crucible of vows, the better to perform their duties. From that moment forward, these lovers will

²⁴ As quoted by Richard John Neuhaus in “The Public Square: A Continuing Survey of Religion and Public Life,” *First Things*, May 2001, Number 113, pages 79-80.

remember that their primary accountability is not to themselves, but to all those who witnessed their vows and, most particularly, the One Who decrees that what He has joined, no man may sever.

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