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Leadership Guides No. 4

Weddings in the Churches of God

*Marriage within the Churches of God needs to be viewed in contrast to the general trends of society as a whole. We try to follow a Biblical pattern, but too often are caught up in the secular or religious distortions of marriage. Any change to the received pattern will require a shift in our perception. This Guidelines addresses the **Wedding Ceremony**.*

- Marriage is joyous, and the wedding ceremony should reflect this. There are few requirements, derived from Scripture, for a wedding: expression of mutual consent, exchange of vows (the marriage contract including a 'dowry'?), celebration, State registration. In Israel certain practices, not necessarily recorded in the Scriptures, became tradition, eg a canopy, the veil, procession, ring, fine clothing, witnesses, feasting (for seven days) and rejoicing. They were symbolic. In Israel a blessing was pronounced on the bride by the families, expressing the hope that she would be fertile

But weddings today are, increasingly, considered as a 'fun thing' - frivolous in dress, in location, in ceremonial, in choice of music. So - many pastors face a dilemma when asked to 'perform' a wedding, especially when the couple is unknown to them.

Conflict can arise, for example, when a minister isn't happy with the suitability of a marriage on any of several grounds. Do the couple understand marriage and its potential ups and downs, joys and pains, times of prosperity and its times of distress? What if either party is divorced once - or more often? Or a serial adulterer? Or if it's a 'marriage of convenience' - for example, to ensure citizenship? Or a 'forced marriage' as in Islamic circles? What if it's a teen fantasy? Or there's an abusive or a criminal background? Or he or she is a 'gold-digger'? What of a huge age difference, or incompatible background, or a 'mixed' marriage? What if it's a same-sex couple seeking Christian marriage? Or if one (or both!) partners are trans-sexual*? *Is the pastor responsible - and to whom - in any degree should the marriage fail or its legality is questioned?*

* NB *Trans-sexuality* is a post-natal psychological phenomenon, and often patients ask for the surgery/hormonal treatment to be reversed. They are just as 'tortured' in their acquired sexual role. Conducting a marriage for a trans-sexual is in effect joining two people of the same sex. In Britain - and elsewhere - proposed legislation will permit the right to change the birth certificate. So you won't know!

In counsel before a marriage, the elder should when necessary make clear any reservations he may have. However, it is the couple's own responsibility to make the final decision. The assembly leadership is an interested third party only, whose role is to prepare a Christian couple for life-long marriage. A suggested outline for godly counselling before a proposed marriage is available.

Pastors would be better, it seems, not to touch a wedding ceremony with the proverbial barge-pole! On the other hand everyone expects a pastor or priest or minister to conduct the ceremony. It's part of Western Christian culture. Yet such involvement in a marriage is certainly not Biblical. The arrangements for a wedding, in the Biblical context, are a matter for both involved families, though there are also State legal considerations. The couple should seek to involve both sets of parents, though the latter are likely to favour a traditional 'white wedding', with clergy officiating.

Leadership Guidelines - *Weddings in the Churches of God*

But the involvement of ‘clergy’ in a wedding ceremony is a tradition born of the enhancement of control by the medieval church priesthood and does not derive from Scripture. Consider the following:

- “According to ancient patriarchal custom, marriage among the Israelites was the affair of the parents...” (C F Keil: *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, v.2, p.167)
- “Marriage [in Israel], being a private affair of the parties and their respective families, required no public ceremony religious or otherwise for its legalisation” (E Neufeld: *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, p.148)
- “The human joy of a Roman bridal procession was denounced [by the church] as obscene, and the church regarded the marriage-rite as a ceremony to be conducted by its own ministers in an attitude of great gravity” (Joseph McCabe: *The Influence of the Church on Marriage and Divorce*, p.59)
- “Marriage [in medieval Christian Europe] was still a civil contract - there was no obligation to be married in church until many centuries later - and it was dissolved on civil grounds” (*ibid.* p.79)
- “The obligation to marry in church [ie a priest officiating] was not imposed until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, and until that date even Romans [Catholics] married without a religious ceremony” (*ibid.* p.94)
- “In Rome itself marriage remained until the sixteenth century a domestic rite” (*ibid.* p.116)
- “Luther saw that the conversion of marriage into a sacrament was an ecclesiastical trick designed to increase the control of the Papacy” (*ibid.* p.150)
- in Judaism it is not required that a rabbi officiate at weddings
- the Scriptures have no direct instruction for a wedding ceremony - or for church involvement in it
- marriage is not, however, merely secular: God is involved in a Christian marriage. Whether or not an elder officiates at the ceremony does not affect this
- The bride and groom (and their families) should work out a ceremony that will be special to them
- a suggested ceremony can perhaps be drawn up by the elders

Conclusion: Within the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* an elder need not feel obligated to conduct a wedding ceremony - or indeed give ‘a blessing’. There must, of course, be *proper registration* with the State authorities.

We should, of course, counsel brethren regarding godly principles - especially on the permanence of marriage - before *and* after a wedding. Church support for newly-weds is vital. But whether or not to marry is a decision to be taken by the couple, as is the form and conduct of the ceremony. [*A study outline on Marriage Counselling is available: Guidelines 8(A)*]

In sum: Marriage has clear analogies with the spiritual - Christ and the Church - but the ‘joining’ belongs to the secular. God has enjoined and set in motion the process, but has not joined individual marriages: ‘what’ and not ‘who’. There is no Biblical reason for the church leadership to be involved. All the brethren in an assembly - not just the pastor - should be supportive of the newly-weds.

[See also the articles *Spend a Lifetime - Together*, *The Edge of Divorce*]

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