

Something Old, Something New: Rethinking the Marriage Service

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“Was it something I said that bound me to you, some mere promise. . .?”

Wendell Berry, “The Country of Marriage”

In the last twenty years almost every major denomination in the United States has revised its liturgy of marriage, some more than once.¹ In one sense this has occurred as a routine part of the renewing of worship which has visited the Catholic and Protestant worlds since Vatican II. Every rite, from baptism to the funeral, is up for reassessment, and the service of marriage is simply taking its proper turn. In another sense, however, the revisions of the marriage rite are not simple liturgical exercises, but are being done against the backdrop of dramatic changes in marriage and family patterns in the culture and in the context of uncertainty about what business the church has getting involved in weddings in the first place. Because this is so, the way the church reshapes the marriage liturgy can serve as a significant and practical indicator of the way the church understands not only marriage, but also the church's place in and relationship to the larger culture. Just as a sample of how cultural and theological issues have come together in this liturgical task, here are two of the major questions which have been faced by those attempting to create contemporary services of marriage:

1. Should there be such an event as a “church” wedding at all?

Christians sometimes refer to all that they do liturgically as “public worship,” but nowhere does that phrase have to be taken more seriously than at a wedding. To call worship “public” usually means two things: (a) that liturgy is, in some sense, a “work of the *people*” and (b) that worship is properly celebrated out in the open (“in *public*”). Weddings are, of course, “public” in both of those ways, but they are also “public” in a third, and more controversial way. In the United States, a wedding is the one regular service of the church which is not only conducted *by* the people and *in view of* the general public, but also *in union with* the larger society (that is, in legal concert with the state). Weddings do not always take place under the auspices of the church, but, even when they do, they do not belong exclusively to the Church. Marriage is of legal and cultural importance to the larger society, and thus the services in which marriage is “contracted” belong to the world as well.

Weddings are "public worship" in the broadest sense of the phrase.

To think of weddings this way makes most Christians more or less nervous. Congregations which have long ago banished the U.S. flag from the sanctuary, and which have articulated their views on issues like peace and economic justice in ways which are clearly over against the prevalent cultural values, still open wide their doors on summer Saturdays and invite the whole culture in for a joint service of nuptial worship which is almost inevitably a patchwork of theological and cultural values. To be sure, the *Prayer Book* is there, holding its own, but, like it or not, so is *Bride's Magazine*.

Broadly speaking, there have been four types of responses to this tension between Christ and culture in weddings. The first of these is for the church candidly to *acknowledge that weddings are irreducible amalgams of faith and sentimentality*, and that, far from attempting somehow to purify the occasion, the church needs to learn to tolerate, even to enjoy, this experience of hand-holding with the popular culture. Weddings constitute one of those rare moments when church and world manage to find joy and meaning in the same event, and the fact that sports coats and vestments, fertility symbols and crosses, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" and "We've Only Just Begun," and bridesmaids and altar boys somehow manage to appear in the same wedding service doesn't create confusion nearly as much as it makes for richness. William Willimon moves toward this view when he states:

Let's face it: standing there in our black suits or robes, Bibles or prayer books in hand, looking earnest and serious, we are up to our necks in the most carnal of incarnations. . . . We want to talk abstractly about *agape*, but the bride and groom are all *eros*. And beside them stand a nervous mother and a befuddled father and a cousin strumming on a guitar and an inebriated best man, all of whom instinctively sense that the union of man and woman is too great a mystery to confront without all the help we can get.

. . . . The real meaning of marriage may have as much to do with the crooning cousins, flowers and upset stomachs, arguments over how to cut the cake, and nervous fathers as it does with all our theological rationalizations of this most delightfully irrational of human acts. I submit that the *real* pastoral task is to stand up boldly, even if embarrassedly, in the middle of all this and dare to proclaim as clearly and sensitively and faithfully as we know how the gospel of Jesus Christ: that these tacky, romantic, transitory moments are redeemed by his loving presence in our midst and thereby given eternal significance.²

The second, completely contrary, and much rarer, approach to the problem of a church wedding has been to *reject the notion of a church-sponsored wedding altogether*. Some ministers, resisting any role as an "agent of the state," have refused to conduct weddings, referring their parishioners to those public officials empowered to perform "civil ceremonies." Often these clergy appeal to ecclesiastical history to support their position. The earliest church was, they claim, intensely interested in the topic of marriage, but largely disinterested in the act of getting married itself, content to leave those details to

the Roman civil authorities. Early Christians were customarily wedded in the same manner as everyone else in the culture, and it was their *marriages*, not their weddings, which they sought to bring into obedience to Christ. "A marriage," states a recent textbook on worship, "was initiated by the couple entering into contract which was regulated by the civil authorities rather than by the Church. . . . [A] wedding was regarded as basically a legal affair."³

Not all liturgical scholars, however, are persuaded that this view tells the whole story. There is strong evidence that at least some of the earliest bishops were concerned about the character of the wedding ceremony itself. The first extra-biblical comment from Christian sources on marriage comes around the turn of the first century and belongs to Ignatius of Antioch:

It is right for men and women who marry to contract their union with the advice of their bishop, so that their marriage is made in the Lord, and not for the sake of passion.⁴

There is a debate among students of the liturgy as to whether Ignatius has in mind a liturgical involvement on the part of the bishop, or simply a pastoral one, but it does seem evident that, in at least some quarters of the early church, Christian couples were not being left entirely to the devices of the Roman government in regard to their weddings. By the second century Athenagoras of Athens is speaking of Christians being "married according to the laws that we have laid down," a remark which led liturgical scholar Kenneth Stevenson to say that "Athenagoras knows of a definite procedure regarding marriage, and that he is referring to a recognized form, involving some sort of liturgy."⁵

Some of the confusion at this point can be accounted for, if not cleared away, by the recognition that the earliest church was not monolithic in terms of liturgy or polity. Different customs were practiced across the geography of the church, and at least two broad patterns were evident. In some regions, the custom was, indeed, for couples to be married by the Roman authorities, and the church was evidently satisfied to leave that practice intact, at least for a while. In other areas, especially those with a strong Jewish influence, another custom prevailed: a home wedding ceremony with a specifically religious character. Here the church probably took an earlier interest in the wedding itself and moved more quickly to invest those ceremonies with explicitly Christian content.

This latter pattern suggests the third response to the "cultural pollution" of the marriage service: *the development of a thoroughly Christian rite which expresses the church's convictions regarding marriage carefully, precisely, and over against the values of the culture.* This rite would be reserved for the marriage of baptized and committed Christians, and all others would be referred to the civil authorities. This is precisely what Reformed theologian J.J. Von Allmen proposes when he insists that the church should place "an emphasis on the specific Christian nature of the wedding ceremony; it should be the *most* and not the least Christian possible." For Von Allmen, a Christian wedding "is not only a sign of the grace of God; it is an act of faith on the part of those who are being married."⁶

There is something cleansing and attractive about this approach. The church would, in effect, say to the world, "We admit we don't own marriage. In creation, God gave marriage to the whole human race. Getting married is not a Christian act, it's a human and social act, and the state, as long as it is just, has every right to regulate marriage. When Christians marry, though, they seek to understand and express their marriages, not only as parts of a general social reality, but also in terms of their more basic and encompassing commitment to Christ, and this is what the marriage liturgy embodies. The church, then, rejoices in all steadfast marriages, but it celebrates in liturgy only the marriage promises of baptized and committed Christians."⁷

This rather surgically clean approach to the matter begins to show some stress, however, when it is exposed to the actual ambiguities of Christian life. It is one thing to hope and pray that Christians who marry will grow to recognize the presence of Christ in their marriage relationship and will increasingly find their marriages to be expressions of their baptismal vocation. It is another thing to design a marriage liturgy around the assumption that the bride and groom have a good, clear theological understanding of those issues on the spot. A comedian once suggested that there is a conspiracy of silence on the part of married people everywhere not to tell unmarried people what marriage is really like, lest the institution disappear. That cynical view is, of course, a comedic exaggeration, but it is true that no bride or groom (even those who have been married before) has more than a thimble-full of awareness of just what he or she is getting into—socially, emotionally, or theologically. One of the functions of a good marriage service is to recognize this and to hold some truths "in trust" for the couple. The marriage service is as much a prayer for where this marriage, through grace, may go as it is a description of the present character of the couple's relationship.

Moreover, Christians often do not marry other Christians, and yet, even when Christians marry outside the faith, not many of them would find the language of a "civil ceremony" to be an adequate expression of what they understand themselves to be doing when they marry. Not only do they sense that their marriages can be an arena for the exercise of their faith, but, in many cases, the "mixed" character of their marriages actually heightens the awareness of their faith identity and responsibility. Is it possible for the marriage liturgy of the church to be fully Christian while, at the same time, fully cognizant of the personal and cultural ambiguities present in virtually every specific occasion of marriage?

This suggests the fourth approach to the problem of the "church wedding": *the development of a service of marriage which is, paradoxically, a "private" ceremony done not only in a "public place," but also in a "public" way.* This is the approach that many of those groups currently revising marriage liturgies have, in fact, chosen. What this means is that the marriage service is firmly established as a service of Christian worship and provides for clear, sometimes even bold, declarations of what the church understands about the theological nature of marriage, but all of this is done in such a way that recognizes that not everyone present (including, sometimes, the bride or the groom) claims these truths as their own.

Such a service unapologetically affirms the transforming power of Christ in marriage, prays for the couple “in Christ’s name,” includes readings from the Christian Scriptures, provides for the granting of a trinitarian blessing, and carefully avoids the introduction of any reading, musical selection, or other element from the culture which would undermine its theological integrity. On the other hand, such a service also affirms the place of marriage in creation and as a gift of God to human society in general, does not demand trinitarian language from a marriage partner who cannot affirm it, and refuses to erect a sacramental barrier at the heart of the event by making the Lord’s Supper normative. In this kind of service the minister is not presented as having any authority, civil or ecclesiastical, to marry the couple. Only the couple possess the authority to marry themselves. In summary, such a service implies that a “church wedding” involves the action of an explicitly Christian congregation at worship, celebrating the marriage of a couple (at least one of whom is Christian), on an occasion at which the world has been expressly invited in to serve as witnesses and to share the joy. It is, therefore, “private” worship in a public place and way, and it can perhaps be compared to those special Passover Seder services to which some synagogues invite their Christian neighbors. In both cases, no compromises are made in convictions, but everything is done so that the invited guests may feel welcome, understand the event, and, to some degree, participate.

2. What form should the service take?

It comes as something of a disheartening surprise to many people to learn that the traditional English-language marriage rites are based, not upon poetic expressions of liturgical creativity, but, of all things, upon real estate contracts. Despite the fact that “to have and to hold from this day forward” sounds juicily romantic, it is the classic language of property rights. This connection between weddings and Century 21 sounds cold and sterile, of course, and even pernicious when it becomes plain that the bride was the “property” being transferred (e.g., “Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?”). The temptation is to scrap the whole concept as hopelessly materialistic and chauvinistic and to begin again, this time with something a great deal warmer, more spiritual, and less culturally-bound.

Fortunately, most of those revising the liturgies have not chosen to do anything of the sort. The fact of the matter is that, once the marriage service is free of the misguided notion that any human being is a piece of property (and, indeed, no genuinely contemporary service has anybody “given away”), the idea of building the service on the format of a real estate contract is theologically ingenious. What, after all, is a wedding about? When all is said and done, a wedding is about two people who are bold enough to make life-long promises to each other in the context of the community which knows and proclaims the steadfast promises of God. Just so, the heart of any civil contract is the free, mutual, and binding promise-making of the parties involved in the context of a community which supports such covenants, and that is precisely the element in marriage-making which needs to be highlighted liturgically.

Whenever the church forgets that promise-making is the theological center of a marriage service, great mischief results. Ministers who put on their most pompous voices to announce, "By the authority granted to me, I declare . . .," as if this were the "moment of consecration" in the wedding, miss the point—both of their true authority and of the true nature of weddings. Marriages are made, not when ministers spread around some pixie dust ground from their authority, but when promises are made between the partners of marriage covenants. For a while, the medieval church, trying to comprehend the "sacramental essence" of marriage, lost its bearings by pointing to sexual intercourse as the sacramental heart of marriage. James White (with a twinkle in his eye, I think), points out that this was a sacrament which was "rather difficult for the church to administer."⁸ Finally, reports White, the church discerned that the promise-making of the couple "by mutual consent uttered aloud at the spot" was, in fact, "the true form and matter of this sacrament."⁹

The marriage service, then, is a service of contracting-covenanting, to use a more theologically apt term—and the use of the civil contract form for this service is the most daring way the church has to affirm its true character. The marriage service begins, as does the civil contract, by stating the terms of the agreement between the two parties. The words of one contemporary service will do as an example: "The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God."¹⁰ To be sure, no ordinary civil contract ever included such all-embracing demands or ever pointed toward such hope-filled support, but marriage, theologically understood, is no ordinary civil contract.

When the terms have been set forth, the witnesses and the couple are questioned about what a lawyer would call the couple's "capacity to contract." They have heard what this covenant is all about. Now, do they understand it? Do they want to be a part of it? Are they free from coercion? Have they made any previous vows to others which would hinder them from these promises? The older services recognized that this was a legal question as well as a theological one, and, therefore, included such language as, "If anyone present knows why these two should not be lawfully joined together. . . ." The modern process of issuing marriage licenses takes care of most of the legal details, allowing the newer marriage rites to replace the technical legal phrasing with richer elements in which the community can pledge support and the couple can indicate that they freely and willingly choose to enter into covenant.

All of this serves as preface for the crucial and high moment in the marriage service: the vows. In the newer services the couple face each other, joining right hands. The minister and the attendants are absorbed into the witnessing congregation. The center of liturgical action is now upon these two. They have heard the eternal promises of God, the steadfast promises of their families and their friends in faith, and even the protective promises of the society, and now they make their lasting and faithful promises to each other.

There are many who want these vows to be stripped of their ultimacy, drained of their bold permanence. No one in this culture, goes the argument, really believes that many of these marriages will last “as long we both shall live.” Indeed, many of the people making those promises made the same promise a few years earlier to another person, and now the words can only be taken as a mockery or, at best, with fingers crossed and along with a realistic grain of salt.

This view, although completely understandable, should be resisted. It assumes that there are two kinds of married people: those who keep their marriage vows and those who do not. Since the percentage of people *not* keeping their vows has grown greatly in recent times, the argument is advanced that there is need for a change in the language of the vows. The marriage vows, however, have always been phrased, like the Sermon on the Mount, in language which is ethically unattainable. No one fully keeps the marriage vows. No one is able always and in all circumstances to be loving and faithful “in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.” The cessation of marriage through divorce is the saddest and most severe breaking of the covenant, but the shadow of sin and failure falls across every marriage. No one lives up to the language of the marriage vow.

Then what kind of language is the language of the vow? Is it ethical language, telling the marriage partners of their responsibilities, even though they cannot fully attain them? Yes, but not in the secular sense of “setting a goal beyond our reach so we will have to stretch,” but rather in the eschatological sense. The ultimate character of the language of the marriage vows must be preserved not because it is traditional, or even because it is ethically challenging, but because it is *true*. Steadfast love and faith are truths about our lives and our marriages even when they are not true about the lives of the human beings who are in marriages. This is so because the marriage vow, like all eschatological language, is a claim not first about what we are called to do, but about what God is doing in and through us. Only in that light does the ethics of keeping the marriage promises make sense. Loving, faithful, and life-long marriages, for all of their imperfections, serve as signs (and, yes, in a way, *sacraments*) of a deeper reality: the eternal covenant love of God. But even a broken marriage, in its own way, points, by virtue of the empty space which it creates, to the same love which never fails.

“Was it something I said that bound me to you, some mere promise. . .?” asks Wendell Berry in his poem “The Country of Marriage.” He continues:

Our bond is no little economy based on the exchange of my love and work for yours, so much for so much of an expendable fund. We don’t know what its limits are—that puts it in the dark. We are more together than we know, how else could we keep on discovering we are more together than we thought? You are the known way, leading always to the unknown, and you are the known place to which the unknown is always leading me back. More blessed in you than I know. . . .¹¹

NOTES

¹ The major branches of the Presbyterian family, for example, have issued two contemporary revisions of the marriage rite, one in 1969 and another in 1972. A third revision is currently in process.

² William H. Willimon, "'Cleaning Up' the Wedding," *The Christian Century*, June 6 13, 1979, p. 654.

³ Duncan Forrester et al., *Encounter With God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), p. 157.

⁴ As quoted in Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶ J. J. Von Allmen, "The Celebration of Christian Marriage," *Liturgical Review* 1 (1971) 9.

⁷ In the new Roman Catholic marriage rites, when a Catholic marries "a baptized person" (Catholic or not) the rubric calls for the priest to go to the door of the Church, meeting "the bride and bridegroom in a friendly manner, showing that the Church shares their joy." When a Catholic marries a person who is not baptized, the words "in a friendly manner, etc." are omitted from the rubric.

⁸ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 243.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 244.

¹⁰ From *The Book of Common Prayer* of The Episcopal Church.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, "The Country of Marriage," *Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 146-7.