

The Origins and Meaning of Our Wedding Service¹

Terry L. Johnson

Not all wedding services are created equal. The service conducted by the justice of the peace at the courthouse is not the same as that conducted at the church by a Christian minister. A Christian service expresses a distinctly Christian outlook and is based on distinctively Christian principles. Similarly Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist wedding services express the distinctives of each of those religious traditions. What are the origins, the principles, the meaning behind our wedding services?

Origins

The origins of our wedding service are found all the way back in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* (and its successors in 1552 and 1662), the first English-language order of service ever produced. We've eliminated some of their more archaic expressions: "I plight/give thee my troth" (bride and groom); "with my body I thee worship: and with all my worldly goods I thee endow" (groom). Nevertheless, the traditional wedding service in the English-speaking world substantially is that of the early editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. From them we have adopted the familiar phrases of our "Exposition":

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is...instituted of God... and is... honorable among all men."

Our "Statement of Intent" borrows this language:

Will you have this woman/man to be your wife/husband ... in sickness and in health... forsaking all others and clinging only to her/him, so long as you both shall live?

The vows themselves utilize these phrases:

I _____ take thee _____ to be my wedded wife... for better or worse... in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish.

¹ The "Our" refers to a traditional Protestant and specifically Reformed and Presbyterian wedding service, an example of which can be found in Johnson, *Leading in Worship* (1996, 2019; Evangelical Press).

To the groom's vows, early editions of *Common Prayer* added to the bride's vows "and to obey," as we do in our wedding service still today. Our concluding "Pronouncement of Marriage" also echoes these early editions. We may trace the origins of our wedding service still further back behind the 1549 *Prayer Book* (and its successors in 1552 and 1662) to its primary source, the *Liturgy of Cologne*, written jointly by Martin Bucer (1491-1551) and Philip Melancthon (1497-1560). All this to say that our wedding service has deep historic roots. More or less it is the service used by most couples in the English-speaking world for nearly 500 years.

Wedding service

We may now return to our service itself. Our "Opening Remarks" describe the service as a public worship service which has everything to say about matters of decorum and modesty, though the service itself leaves this unsaid. The following principles may be identified.

Instituted by God

The "Exposition" section of the wedding service begins by identifying marriage ("holy matrimony") as "instituted by God" and "regulated by His commandments." Later, when the couple affirms the "Statement of Intent," their commitment to have each other, they do so "according to the ordinance of God in the holy bond of marriage." The "Pronouncement of Marriage" declares the couple husband and wife "according to the ordinance of God." Marriage, according to our service, is of divine origin and design, referring to Genesis 2:22-25 and Matthew 19:3-12. It is not a human institution. It is not a human creation. "God has established sanctified marriage," the "Exposition" continues. He determines the duties of husbands. He determines the duties of wives. His commandments determine the nature of the commitment that the respective partners make. It is marriage as God has ordained and structured that the "Exposition" declares is "blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ," referring to His presence at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-10).

Man and woman

Marriage as God has designed it brings together a man and a woman into procreative union. The "Exposition" explains that the service unites "this *man* and this *woman*" in marriage. "Our Savior" is quoted as declaring that "a *man* shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his *wife*. The "Statement of Intent" requires that "the man" commit to have "this woman" to be his wife, and "the woman" commit to have "this man" to be her husband. The "Exchange of Vows" requires that "the man" take "the woman" by the hand and promise to take her "to be (his) wedded wife" (again, Mt 19:3-12) and he "to be (her) loving and faithful husband." The reverse is the case for the woman's vows as she promises to be the man's "loving and faithful wife." The pronouncement of marriage declares them to be "husband and wife." We have labored this point

because regrettably, this is a point that requires emphasizing in the confused times in which we live.

Their union is a procreative union, which is the distinctive quality that makes this relationship a marriage as opposed to something else. “The two become one flesh.” They are united in a “one flesh” union, the biblical and biological design of which is procreation. This is what makes marriage to be marriage. The 1549 and traditional Anglican/Episcopal *Prayer Book* service is more direct than our service. It specifies the following as the first among the “causes for which matrimony was ordained:”

It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Welfare of mankind

Marriage, as God has ordained and established it, is not designed arbitrarily. It is not based merely on God’s bare authority. It is designed “for the welfare and happiness of mankind,” as the “Exposition” explains. Those who enter into marriage are

to cherish a mutual esteem and love; to bear with other’s infirmities and weaknesses; to comfort each other in sickness, trouble, and sorrow; in honesty and industry to provide for each other, and for their household, in temporal things; to pray for and encourage each other in the things which pertain to God; and to live together as the heirs of the grace of life.

The above ideals paint a beautiful portrait of married life. Marriage provides for those who enter into it a supportive companion to stand by one through the vicissitudes of life. Marriage as God has ordained it is a gift of His goodness. It is not limiting or confining or restrictive. Rather it is suited to the human condition. It is the context in which human “flourishing” may be experienced. It was ordained, says the *Book of Common Prayer*,

For the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other.

Exclusive and lifelong

Christian marriage requires exclusive intimacy. The couple pledges faithfulness in their “Statement of Intent.” They pledge to “forsake all others and cling” only to each other. They pledge faithfulness again in their “Exchange of Vows.” Moreover, they pledge a lifelong commitment. The vows establish a permanent bond in the face of all the challenges of life. Consequently, they vow to be “loving and faithful,”

for better or worse, in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish as long as we both shall live.

Or, as the older version of the vows concluded, “till death do us part.” Divorce is forbidden for Jesus’ disciples (both Mt 5:31-32 and 19:3-12). His words from Matthew 19:6 are cited as part of the “Pronouncement of Marriage.”

Whom therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.

The permanence of the marriage commitment means that there can be security in marriage and in life. Couples united in the covenant of marriage need not fear “the morning after.” They can depend on each other. They can rely on each other. They are responsible for each other. They are to *be there* for each other. They safely can let themselves be known by their spouse because that spouse is committed for life. They safely can be open and honest without fear of rejection or abandonment. One’s companion in marriage is a companion for life.

Moreover, because couples know that the commitment they make in marriage is a permanent commitment, the decision to marry is a different kind of commitment than one made by those who have a “we’ll see” or “hope for the best” approach. If marriage is for life, those entering into it do so with far more care than do those for whom marriage is an experiment. This is why the old *Prayer Book* explicitly states that marriage is not to be entered into

Unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, in the fear of God; daily considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

We have tempered some of the language over the centuries, yet the principle is the same. Marriage is a big decision.

Faithfulness not feelings

Finally, the marriage commitment in our service requires pledges of what one will do, not what one feels. Feelings come and go. The love which one pledges is expressed in faithfulness without regard to circumstances. Again, the vows have the couple give themselves to their respective spouse in marriage

for better for worse; in plenty and want; in joy and sorrow; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish as long as we both shall live.

Feelings rule our world today. I am only being true to myself, it is assumed, when I do what I feel like doing. If one is to be “authentic,” one must follow one’s passions. The traditional Christian wedding service says the opposite. While not discounting feelings, it requires commitment not to feelings but to promises. It leads the bride and groom to pledge faithful and loving care for each, not merely for the duration of their passion, but for life.

Conclusion

None of the foregoing should be seen as extraordinary. Our wedding service simply represents a historic Christian, Protestant, and Reformed understanding of marriage as believed and practiced for centuries. Our wedding service reflects the conviction that marriage is a divine institution, unites a man and a woman in a permanent, exclusive and procreative union, asks for commitment to both one’s future spouse and the institution of marriage itself, and is divinely calculated to promote human flourishing.

Terry L. Johnson is the senior minister of Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, GA. He is author of various books, including *Leading in Worship*, *Worshipping with Calvin*, *Serving with Calvin*, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, and *Who Am I? What the Bible teaches about Christian identity*.

TAGS: Christian marriage, Christian wedding service, Presbyterian wedding vows, permanence of marriage, Matthew 19:3-12, Matthew 5:31-32, John 2:1-10, Genesis 2:22-25.