Thoughts on Weddings [1]

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I had the honour last week of attending the wedding of a good friend from my previous church. It took place in a neighbouring province, and so some friends and I made a three day trip to go bear witness and to celebrate that blessed occasion. On our way we reflected and discussed courting and marriage a bit. These have been frequent topics of late, as it is the season to get married: both literally and in our lives (one member of our group had attended seven weddings this year, with at least one more to come still). I am struck by how differently Christian and secular couples perceive weddings and marriage. Here are some of my thoughts on the topic.

Marriage

By way of introduction I need to make clear what marriage means to me. In brief, marriage is the making of a vow and a promise, a *covenant*, between one man and one woman before God and human witnesses, that the man will love, respect and protect his wife, and that the wife will love, respect and honour her husband. Both are to remain faithful, as the two "become one flesh"[1]—a unity.

For Christians, they are to hold to all that the Bible teaches about marriage and family. It is not that those principles do not apply to non-Christian couples (because they are objective, divine commandments), but only Christians who affirm those principles can and should be held to them (by other people).

Engagements

I was discussing engagements with a friend a while back. He was of the opinion that the engagement is a far more intimate thing than a wedding. That was his answer to my question why the engagement ring is more grand than the wedding ring. I respectfully disagree, however. By his own admission an engagement should not be (or, at least, usually is not) a surprise to either person in the relationship. Both people are in a committed, longstanding relationship working towards a goal (marriage). There usually also are hints and clues that it is coming (e.g. a linger walk past wedding dresses in a shopping mall, or something like that). Additionally, for my Christian friends and myself, *dating* is the preparation for marriage, not the engagement. We believe that already during the early stages of dating the "big" issues should be discussed which are often left until the engagement, such as how many children the couple wants, will both the man and the woman work, where will they live, *et cetera*. The engagement then becomes, as in ancient times, only a period during which the *wedding* is planned (as opposed to the whole married life).

The engagement is, however, the man's prerogative to surprise his bride-to-be in whatever way he

wants: whether a romantic picnic in a secluded park or televised on the big screen at a packed sports game. By my friend's reasoning it is an intimate moment shared only by the couple. But if you are going to propose in front of 10000 people, I do not think that it is a private and intimate affair anymore. I believe that the wedding itself is more intimate, as I shall explain shortly. But while the engagement is important and will hopefully foster great memories, I believe that many people, whether Christian or not, will agree *a posteriori* that it is less important [2] than what is to come. Getting engaged is making a promise to make a promise. While it is not a trivial thing, I think the making of the actual promise is a bigger deal.

In another discussion with a female friend it became clear that some women can be fussy about the ring which they get (regardless of how much she loves the man, apparently). I was given the advice to rather propose with a "dud" ring, so that the couple (i.e. the woman), can choose a proper ring later. Not that this will be happening for me anytime soon, but I put it down here for the benefit of whoever may read it.

Wedding Ceremonies

For most people, wedding ceremonies are simply things from tradition. And not even necessarily Christian tradition, as modern Western wedding ceremonies incorporate many cultural elements which do not have a strict Christian foundation. I can believe that for some it is a drudgery, something to sit through to be able to get to the open bar at the reception. But for me, the wedding ceremony is the pinnacle of the day's events. It is happy and joyous, but also grave. Grave, because a very big and important commitment is made *before God*. This is true whether it is a Christian wedding or not, as God is omnipresent, and marriage is a good gift which He has given to all people. A man and a woman enters into a covenant relationship with each other. The promises that they make bind them before God and one day He will hold them accountable for their promises and whether they kept them faithfully or not. That is what makes it so intimate: the sharing of vows before man a God, making a deep and earnest commitment. And it is between just those two people, in that very moment of saying "I do".

Receptions

As a friend stated last week, attending a wedding is not just to bear witness to a wedding (which is a legal necessity in many countries), but also to help *celebrate*. People invite their family and close friends to their wedding because they want them to share in their joy. Some people want big, flamboyant weddings. But most people I know want small, relaxed weddings.

There are no Christian prescripts for wedding receptions and no theological connections (other than, perhaps, community and fellowship). But there is a tendency amongst some people to have expensive weddings, with the reception being a big showpiece. In the long term this can have a detrimental effect on the institution of marriage itself. A young married couple from Canada told me this year that it was refreshing for them to hear of so many engagements and marriages happening in the community in which they lived here in South Africa. In Canada, according to them, there is this perception that a wedding is "just a big party" and only the wealthy have them. So people resort to cohabitation. This wrong view of what a wedding is leads to a sinful perception of marriage. People need to be weary of that. Celebrate your wedding as you wish and are able to, but do not judge other people by how they choose to have their wedding.

I have a slight personal irk in wedding receptions. In the Afrikaner culture it is tradition to heckle the groom during his speech. While I understand that it is done in jest and good spirit, I dislike the fact that such a special and sincere moment gets spoilt. And then there is always the danger of someone getting drunk or otherwise losing their inhibitions. People should behave themselves and not allow anything to be taken away from the bride and groom on their special day.

Divorce

Divorce is commonplace in Western societies. Divorce figures sometimes breach the 30%, 40% or even 50% mark. As I mentioned earlier, during a wedding a couple makes a promise before God. Promises are important things: God keeps His promises and expects people to keep theirs. People are *expected* to endure great trials and hardships during a marriage. Because such is life in a fallen world. Those who succeed in their marriage will testify that it is not always easy, and sometimes very trying.

The issue of divorce is extremely difficult to address, especially in the Christian context. Some believe that a divorce should never be permitted, while others hold that it is permissible under certain circumstances. I am not going to address the issue further here other than saying that divorce is a terrible thing which should be avoided as far as possible. To this end a couple needs to be aware of the implications of a marriage on their lives and understand that they need to persevere through some potential really unhappy times.

Conclusion

When Martin Luther was still a Roman Catholic monk, he was ordained as a priest and had to conduct his first mass. It was a big occasion, with family and friends who came to support him. He went through the ceremony flawlessly, until he came to the Eucharist (Communion). The Roman Catholics believe that when the Prayer of Consecration is said during the Eucharist, the bread and the wine are miraculously transformed [3] into the actual flesh and blood, respectively, of Jesus Christ. When Martin Luther came to this point in the mass, he froze up completely. He was visibly trembling, and eventually another priest had to step up to complete the ceremony. After the mass, Luther's father was very upset with him. Luther explained: "Don't you understand? I had the body and blood of Jesus Christ in my hand. How do I, as a sinful man, handle these holy things? How can I speak normally in the presence of such wonder and awe?"

Regardless of what Martin Luther believed about the Eucharist at that point in his life, it is *how* he reacted in that moment which is noteworthy. Every week hundreds, if not thousands, of priests would conduct the same ceremony all over the world and not think twice about what they were doing. But there stood Luther, paralysed by the gravity, the responsibility, of handling the very body of the holy Christ. He was so acutely aware of his own sinfulness that he could not allow himself to continue with the ceremony to clean away his own sins, let alone those of the other people in the church.

I wonder if this is what goes through the minds of a Christian man and a Christian woman when they stand in front of the altar. Man, do you promise that you will be *like Christ* to this woman, sacrificing yourself and always putting her first2? To have and to hold, to protect, in sickness and in health, *until death do you part*? Woman, do you promise to obey, honour and serve this man, to council him selflessly and wisely3? Does the weight of such a promise weigh on you, that you become mute and fumbling? That you recognise that you are making a holy promise before a perfect God, knowing that you are a sinful man or woman? As a man I feel weighed down every time I hear a groom told to make his vows. (But I am also excited, because it is a holy endeavour.) Or does it simply roll off the tongue, a ritualistic step that leads to the next steps: a kiss and the signing of a legal document?

Perhaps it is good to not yet be married; to reflect on these things.

- 1. Genesis 2:24.
- 2. Ephesians 5:25–30, 1 Peter 3:7.
- 3. Ephesians 5:22–24, 1 Peter 3:1–6, Proverbs 31:26–31.

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