

How Can We Not Preach at Weddings?

Combing the Contexts of the Rhetorical Situation for a Fit Word from the Lord

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The pastor's task is not to test the couple's faith, but to testify to the church's faith that—even for people so poorly equipped—the promises of marriage are possible, by the grace of God.¹

If you ever want a lively conversation with a pastor, all you have to do is ask for wedding stories to start the rolling of eyes and recitation of rollicking good sagas. As Will Willimon says, weddings are a celebration of God's beneficent incarnationality in the midst of life's most intimate carnality,² which always makes things interesting. Weddings are both serious and joyous occasions, yet many pastors prefer funerals to weddings, because at least at a funeral pastors have an important role to perform. Confronted with their own mortality, at funerals people pay attention to what the pastor has to say about the mysteries of life and death. At weddings, though, pastors can feel like the human equivalent of the rented carpet roll.

The truth is, we are officiating at an event of eternal significance. Whether or not anyone else recognizes this, we do, and it is our job to tell them, whether we think they want to hear it or not. We are, after all, ministers of the gospel of God as representatives of Christ. Therefore, when we do a church wedding, we should not only consider it a worship service—as our Reformed traditions mandate³—we also should seriously consider it an occasion for preaching.

WE'RE CALLED TO PREACH

Curiously, though, a wedding sermon is not required by the *Book of Order* despite the fact that preaching is one of the historic hallmarks of the Reformed tradition.⁴ Though the Directory for Worship mandates certain parts of the wedding, a sermon is not something that *shall* be done; it is only prescribed as something that *may* be offered. The sermon is not even specifically mentioned, relegated to one possible “form of proclamation”⁵ equal to any other form, such as, say, a liturgical dance interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13 or “The Wedding Song” sung by Aunt Cacophony. This is surprising. Ministers ordained by the church are people under authority, not just of the state (in the case of a wedding)⁶ but ultimately of the living God who calls us to preach and disciple people in the meaning of the good news of God-with-us. As ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament, we are called to sow seeds of the gospel in everything we do, even as we tread the hardest of ground; and preaching at a wedding can certainly seem as foolish as a farmer broadcasting precious seeds on the highway. Our polity may not require it, but Christ tells us to preach the good news, broadcasting it everywhere, and even our polity tells us that Christ trumps its mandates.⁷ While others may find a sermon superfluous in a wedding service, why should we not consider its inclusion as the norm? If the salt of our proclamation in weddings has lost its flavor because we have acquiesced to others' denigrating definitions of us, perhaps we should quit whining about being as

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trampled underfoot as the rented carpet roll and start preaching.

Of course, it could be said that we are preaching in everything we do with regard to impending nuptials. From the first contact with a couple wishing to be married, in premarital meetings, with the liturgy of the ceremony, to the completion of the license, we are called to proclaim the gospel. Still, a wedding sermon illuminates what all the church's actions and liturgies mean by deliberately pointing to the One in whose name we gather for a wedding and the One whose covenant of love with humanity makes possible all sacred covenants of committed care that human beings make to one another.

NAMING THE GRACE

We may agree that we should preach at weddings, but what should we preach? In order to answer this question, we have to see it in light of its larger context of the purpose of all preaching. The act of preaching, Mary Catherine Hilkert argues, is the act of naming God's grace where it is already present in the world, as well as proclaiming the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ in places devoid of that reality.⁸ Preachers are gospel seed-sowers as well as detectives of the divine.⁹ Preaching at a wedding is known as occasional preaching, which requires careful exegesis of the occasion in order to know which part of the gospel to proclaim into the given situation. Preparing a wedding sermon, then, requires not only examination of scripture but also of the places where God is already at work in human life in order to help people see Christ's salvific presence more clearly. Before we can know what to preach at a wedding, we have to discern where God is already speaking, as seen through the Christian tradition's words and rituals, so that we might amplify God's speaking in such a way that the people before us might hear a word from the Lord through our words. Doing this requires examining the rhetorical context of the particular wedding at which we will be preaching with all its rich array of contextual issues at play in order to make judgments regarding exactly what sermon to compose in accord with the gospel for this particular wedding.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION OF THE WEDDING WITH ALL ITS ATTENDANT CONTEXTS

So we turn to analyze the rhetorical situation of the wedding before us. Lloyd Bitzer, a rhetorician, defines the notion of a rhetorical situation as "[a] complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigency which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigency."¹⁰ Let's break that down a bit. An exigency is a need that requires something be said in such a way as to alter the situation, which, in the case of a wedding, is a need to receive for assurance and instruction from God as a couple starts married life together. Instead of listing what generic things could be preached at a wedding, this article will focus on the process of discovering what God would have us say to a particular couple at a particular space in time in order to assure them of divine blessing and assuage their understandable trepidation. Knowing exactly what instruction and assurance to speak on behalf of Christ requires careful examination of the rhetorical situation in light of the gospel.

Any wedding involves a myriad of contexts and issues swirling around the pastor, the couple, and the gathered community, and all of these contexts need to be analyzed with a theological eye. We will examine the contexts in which the wedding occurs by starting with the pastor and the couple and then zooming out from there in order to see the greater cultural and worship contexts in which the wedding occurs. Think of a series of concentric circles emanating from the minister standing before the couple. The pastor and the couple stand at the center of the wedding, but each brings certain cultural and religious beliefs into that situation. The service itself occurs within a variety of other contexts that also bear examination. We probe these contexts with a caveat, however: All of these contexts impinge on and interact with one another in reality, like lily pads overlap one another in a pond. Things get messy as categories spill over into one another, but a preacher needs to examine these various contexts in their dynamic relationality with an eye on where sin needs gospel and where grace needs named.

The Context of the Pastor and the Pastoral Relationship

A particular couple comes to be wed by a particular pastor for some reason. Hopefully that reason is because one of the parties is a member of that church, in which case, there is some degree of relationship already there. If the member is a recent college graduate, though, the pastor may not know the member, especially if she is a fairly new pastor. The pastor may not know the betrothed even if a well-beloved parishioner has asked her to marry them. Many times the couple requesting the pastor's services does not know the pastor at all. They're often a friend or relative of a parishioner, or perhaps they're a couple who randomly chose the pastor because she comes with the cute little church that will be the site of their perfect wedding. The depth of the existing relationship is a consideration because we can say things to people we know better than we can to those we just met. The exigency of the rhetorical situation demands that our words be appropriate, which is partially determined by the degree of familiarity.

At the center of the rites stands the minister as a representative of Christ. Therefore, pastors need to be aware of their own views on marriage so that they may not adversely color the preparation of a sermon, especially if their own marital issues are pressing. Similarly, pastors need to cull through their own theology regarding their role in performing a wedding ceremony and act in accord with it. Brant Copeland helps us do this by noting that there are two basic theological approaches to marriage. One sees marriage under the doctrine of creation, the other under the doctrine of discipleship.¹¹ If the pastor sees marriage as a gift of God to all of humanity, regardless of the couple's belief, he is viewing marriage under the doctrine of creation. With this theology, pastors may choose to marry anyone who requests it, with the hope that seeds of faith will be planted where none might otherwise be, an act of covert evangelism. The other theological approach sees marriage under the doctrine of discipleship as a way of pledging to follow Christ in covenant with another human being, which means at least one partner is Christian, if not both, as Paul advocates (2 Corinthians 6:14). Both approaches are legitimate, and most pastors vacillate between the two depending on the circumstances. Lest we be too quick to condemn

theological waffling, the truth is that most pastors concede their own personal theological positions for the greater good in certain circumstances. The point is to be aware of what we're doing and why so that gospel might be proclaimed in all things.

The Context of the Couple

Of course, the couple also stands at the center of the marriage ceremony, and they represent other contexts that need to be exegeted in order to see where the Holy Spirit is already at work and what word might prepare the way for Christ's coming more fully among us. Each person of the couple comes from a specific family background and other life experiences that have molded their way of being in the world. Their family's ethnic background, family dynamic, education, where they grew up, religious backgrounds, associations (country club, bowling league, community service clubs, etc.), and former marriage(s) and families are all particular "cultures" that merit consideration. Pastors need to get to know such things not only in order to discern how best to extend the ministry of the church to them, but in order to know how to preach at their wedding.

Furthermore, the context of the couple's relationship needs to be culled to see how their story merges with the story of God-with-us. We might assume that if they met while singing in the choir of their respective churches at a community Thanksgiving worship service, they are a couple whose values mesh nicely with Christian ideals. If they met during chugalug night at the local bar, that may not be the case. Then again, it might; the Lord works in mysterious ways, and it's our job to know the way of the Lord and be able to recognize its appearance through all the myriad of life's murky details and point this way out to others who would follow. For all we know, the choir members could be atheists paid to sing. We need to guard against jumping to hasty conclusions, probing for pertinent details in order to make a good spiritual assessment of the foundation of the couple's love (as opposed to lust or infatuation). Since marriage is a living out of our baptism in union with another, we need to ask how detached the couple is from their alliance with sin's way of doing things and how firmly attached they are to Christ—both as individuals and as a couple. Knowing this one thing will determine whether the sermon needs to just cover the basics or provide a more nuanced proclamation of the gospel.

How the couple met and what initially attracted them to one another may provide clues for how a wedding sermon might be constructed through theological analogy.¹² For example, if the couple met while bungee jumping, the sermon could center around the idea of marriage being a leap of faith, not in one another, but in God whose love binds us securely in Christ. Matthew 18:18-20 could be chosen as the scripture for the sermon to indicate that what's being done today is binding this couple together as one in Christ. Done well, such a uniquely tailored wedding sermon can be remembered for its gospel proclamation for years to come and be brought to mind when times are tough. As a preacher, we need to get to know the couple's story as well as their individual stories so that we can preach a pertinent word from the Lord to them on the threshold of marital life together.

Veteran pastors wisely advise us to assume nothing in premarital discussions with couples.¹³ If the bride is eight months' pregnant, no wedding dress will hide this fact. Better to fish out such details and provide help rather than judgment. In such instances, the sermon will have to acknowledge the obvious and speak God's Word into the situation frankly and gracefully. A sermon on the Lord's intended blessings of living together as families may be in order, not only for the new family but for a perhaps perturbed extended family who needs to hear a good word fitly spoken in order to support, not tear down, the new family. Similarly, a sermon for the blending of two families can talk about what unity in Christ looks like—a unity that does not erase distinctness like a puréed soup but rather joins all together like a stew with distinct ingredients.

Basically, preachers need to know as much about the life and lives of the couple as they can. They need to know about their family backgrounds, how they met, how long they've been dating and/or cohabitating, what issues there are for each of them as well as between them, what their visions of the future look like, what their views on religion, family, and life in general are, how their extended family feels about the union, how they will deal with children and step-children, and their feelings about the couple's marriage. The more pastors know about the couple and the larger familial situation, the better they can prepare a meaningful wedding sermon that will both speak to them and proclaim

the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the need to preach a tailor-made wedding sermon can be a pretext for premarital counseling sessions that most couples are reluctant to undertake.¹⁴ A pastor may find the couple more cooperative to premarital meetings and even enticed into seeing what further goodness the church has to offer them in their future relationship if they encounter a pastor with integrity as a minister of God, who's also devoted to providing a service uniquely fit for them.

Cultural Contexts

Of the Couple and their Families

As already alluded, the couple comes concomitant with various cultural contexts by virtue of their histories, and these contexts are places that need to be mined in order to see what gospel gems lurk within and what places need the light of God's gracious good Word. After all, we are not preaching just to the couple, but to the whole gathered community. A poor Mexican immigrant marrying a Philadelphia debutante will bring obvious cultural issues, but it's too easy to deal with such surface demographics jokingly in a sermon as a way of breaking the ice at a tense wedding, and it's probably unfaithful. Both cultures have good qualities and bad, and any successful relationship will learn how to draw from the strengths of both and minimize the more negative qualities in order to reach mutual harmony (*shalom*) to the glory of God. When doing a wedding in which obvious differences exist, it's probably better to state the obvious and then preach from a scripture that explicates God's love transcending all human barriers before going on to discuss the nature of vows taken in Christ and what living in Christ looks like as a way of being that trumps all cultural assumptions. If the couple is marrying in a patriarchal culture, the gospel needs to be brought to bear in a sermon that shows the radical egalitarian and respectful nature of all relationships in Christ, even if the woman seems happy to play Donna Reed to his "Father Knows Best." Ephesians 5:21-33 may be just what is needed, a text often misinterpreted, but one that shows mutual submission to one another as unto the Lord as Christ's gift of himself to the church.¹⁵

Of our Media Culture's Depiction of Marriage

In addition to the particular cultures that have shaped the couple, the general ethos of the United States' media culture also has exerted some amount of influence on the couple's views, whether recognized or not. An analysis of marriage as depicted by current media arts reveals a cultural expectation that a wedding is about pledging and expressing love as defined by romantic feelings rather than a discipline to care when passion's heart palpitations disappear. Popular songs have been crooning codependence for decades now (if not outright denigration of the other as in some songs today). Romantic comedies, a favorite genre of American movies, traditionally end in a wedding,¹⁶ as is standard for the classical comedy. The weddings are lavish affairs with often vacuous vows, if these are even depicted. The church and the pastor are like plastic decorations on top of a wedding cake. If Hollywood depicts a pastor actively involved in a couple's wedding preparations, he is Robin Williams in *License to Wed*, a stock character known as the wise fool, but one who says nothing about God that's serious theologically, concentrating instead on helping people confront the difficulties of life together instead of telling them about the divine source of all true love that will help them overcome these difficulties.

Actually, the media's depiction of marriage is most often a tragedy when seen in the light of the reality of marriage. Though romantic comedies encourage a fairytale perspective on marriage, no one lives happily ever after "because they've found their soulmate," e-Harmony commercials notwithstanding. Truth is, Prince Charming leaves his smelly socks on the floor, and Sleeping Beauty uses a face cream that scares small children. Films outside the genre of romantic comedies that depict marriage are sometimes scarier than horror movies with their portrayal of marriage as a kind of hell, as seen in anything from affair- and angst-ridden Woody Allen movies to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* or *The War of the Roses*. The media's extreme views of marriage can lead to either/or thinking that makes it difficult for people today to hold the ambiguities of human existence in the light of God's grace. The normative cultural message sent by the media is that one must be either rapturously in love or leave in order to avoid the hell that is to come. Few movies admit that the strange admixture of forces for good and ill that comprise human beings

makes relationships difficult, and that this is *As Good as It Gets* east of Eden.

We have desecrated the portrayal of love and marriage in the media, but there are more realistic depictions of marriage beyond so-called "reality TV" (which also is extreme because only the extremes of life make for drama). For instance, a pastor may be able to draw on a startling dramatic moment when truth about love and marriage leaps centerstage, as in the pilot of *State of Mind*, when psychologist Ann Bellows, beyond exasperation at trying to counsel an acrimonious couple, blurts out what many professionals would like to say but usually don't:

What is it with you people? I mean, you have looks. You have luck. You have IQs over 75, no apparent physical disabilities, and all you do is piss and moan about how you deserve better. You don't deserve better. . . . What do you think—marriage is easy? It's not. It's not easy. You're in a little lifeboat, you morons, in a big cold ocean. And there you both are, too lazy to row, too selfish to do one inch more than your share. And there's a hole in the boat, and what do you do? "You fix it. No, you fix it. But I fixed it the last time. It's your fault. No, it's your fault." Believe me, it's not the other person's fault. It's yours. Do you offer the other a hand? Do you row when the other one gets tired? Do you forgive? Do you apologize, as everybody needs to, a lot, for our mistakes, for our accidental cruelties, for the ways in which we disappoint each other all the time? No, you just sit there, co-captains of the what's-in-it-for-me team waiting for someone else, apparently the marriage fairy, to fix it. There is no marriage fairy, people! You either help each other, or the marriage dies. And then there you are, two more people treading water alone and cold and wondering what went wrong. Shut up about your needs. Shut up about the past. Do more. Give more. Give what you never got. Love each other more than you deserve, for God's sake!¹⁷

Using such cultural means, we can reach people with the gospel by drawing alongside them like Philip with the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26ff) in order to help them understand what makes giving what they never got, possible—namely, the transcendent love

of God, the source of all love made available to us all in Jesus Christ. While he's no marriage fairy, Christ gives us the power to love beyond our limitations by bathing us in the love of God, out of which all human love springs, and blessing us beyond what any of us deserves.

Of Sociological Trends in Marriage

In addition to keeping current on cultural arts, those who preach at weddings also need to be aware of sociological trends in the general culture with regard to marriage. A recent study on marriage done by the Pew Research Center reported that children are no longer a factor in defining the purpose of marriage. Instead, the report concludes, we see the purpose of marriage as providing deep mutual satisfaction. When it fails to provide this satisfaction, divorce is preferable to staying in a bad marriage, even when children are involved. The ideal of mutual marital satisfaction, though, strikes many as elusive, and mistrust of this possibility contributes to the common practice of cohabitation before marriage. About one-third of all adults (40 percent for those under age 50) have lived with someone to whom they were not married. When asked what makes a marriage successful, 95 percent of the people surveyed said faithfulness was very important. A happy sex life came in second, sharing household chores third, adequate income and good housing fourth and fifth, and shared religious beliefs sixth. Children came in eighth, below shared interests. Despite the wariness of leaping into marriage by cohabiting first, though, the divorce rate hovers at 50 percent.¹⁸ A generation or two ago, marriage was at least partly a matter of pragmatic perseverance based on a promise made before God and these witnesses. Today, however, when marriages no longer fulfill our personal needs, we may follow a cultural message that encourages us to leave them even though, ironically, nearly all of us consider faithfulness to be crucial for a good marriage.

What this general cultural study means for the pastor is that for those with nominal connections to the church, the exigency of the rhetorical situation demands that the sermon emphasize the meaning of faithfulness in the covenant of marriage, for that is a mutual desire for both the church and people of today's thoroughgoing secular society. The sermonic twist, however, is that being in a marital covenant means we vow to be faithful regardless of what the

other does. Faithfulness here is not just about sexual fidelity, though that is non-negotiable; faithfulness also includes commitment to do the work of marriage with the forgiveness and compassion available through Christ. Marriage is about committing to give, not receive, and this is something that none of us can do well on our own without the spiritual resources the church has to offer in its testimony to the way of God in Christ Jesus.

Another way the church can draw alongside American culture is with a wedding sermon that explores what it means to be family. While parents may no longer stay in a bad marriage for their children's sake, the Pew Research Center report also notes that children and family are still considered important today; it's just the 1950s definition of family that's changing. In situations where familial issues are screaming to be addressed, the preacher can explicate the Genesis account of God's creation of human beings, showing how we are created to live in union with one another and called to care for the most vulnerable in society. Regardless of the kind of family that will be established by the bond of the couple before them, pastors can proclaim the Bible's overarching theme of the covenantal love of God who created us to live in harmonious relationships with one another and gave us the Spirit to forgive when we don't. This can be paired with the liturgy's mention that marriage and family are important building blocks of social good,¹⁹ which is why a wedding is never just the couple's wedding. A marriage is an inherently communal affair, so those gathered also make vows to support the couple's marriage. Probing the foundations of what actually holds two or more of us gathered together as couples and families can thus provide rich sermonic material, especially when paired with the promise that Christ is where two or more are gathered in his name.

Context of Worship

Even if the pastor is performing a wedding knee-deep in a fishing creek in the middle of nowhere, she does so as a representative of the church. As such, there are certain theological assumptions that come to bear on the wedding just by virtue of the presence of a church-ordained pastor. First are the denominational beliefs the pastor represents beyond her own theology of marriage. For a Reformed pastor, this means that the wedding is a covenant-

making worship service that first and foremost glorifies God, not the couple's love, a notion contrary to most cultural expectations of nuptial rites.

Denominational beliefs are reflected in the liturgical context of the wedding. The "Statement on the Gift of Marriage" in the *Book of Common Worship's* wedding liturgies, for example, provides a good summary of the church's theology on the meaning of marriage that can be expounded upon in a sermon. Reflecting on the wedding liturgy and discussing its meanings with the couple is possibly the most important part of premarital counseling, and such liturgical contemplation often provides rich sermonic fodder. Ritual actions also can provide helpful resources for preaching at a wedding, and the pastor will want to sift through these meanings and discuss them with the couple as well, listening to them speak about the meaning of such actions as the declaration of intent, the familial blessing, the vows of the congregation, the exchange of vows, and symbols of those vows. Many times it is the pastor who is explaining what these mean to the couple, but sometimes the couple offers astonishing theological insights that can be incorporated into the wedding sermon structured around the meaning of the liturgy and liturgical actions.

The preacher will, of course, also want to sift through the larger Christian tradition and scripture. Herein lies a problem for us in the Reformed tradition. We know that scripture is the weightiest source for revealing what it is that the living Lord is calling us to be and do in order to live the good life God intends for creation, so we advocate preaching that expounds on scripture. However, there are few scriptures that appropriately pertain to marriage and family in the Bible from which we can preach faithfully in fulfillment of Christ's command to preach the gospel. In the case of occasional preaching, the theology of the church speaking to the rhetorical situation actually takes precedence over scriptural explication. Which scriptures we choose to use at a wedding, then, are determined by the church's theology of marriage and Christ's command to preach the gospel incarnationally.

There are, however, places that list possible scriptures to use at a wedding. The *Book of Common Worship* has ten pages that list suggested scriptures for weddings.²⁰ Susan Hedahl's book, *Preaching the Wedding Sermon*, also contains lists of suggested

wedding scriptures of various denominations.²¹ Couples may be asked to read the scriptures on such lists in order to choose what speaks to them, and discussing these texts with couples can provide many helpful insights for the pastor to discern what the sermon needs to emphasize and which scriptures to use for preaching and other liturgical purposes. In addition to the standard wedding scriptures, though, the pastor needs to consider choosing scripture that fits what he discerns the Lord is longing to speak into this important moment in time, so preachers need to know scripture and be able to use a concordance well enough to choose more unique texts with faithfulness to Christ's call to preach the gospel and its ramifications into the particular situation before them.

Basically, it's the church's theology of marriage rather than any one particular scripture that serves as the basis for the wedding sermon. Woven out of Christ's blessing of marriage as found in various scriptures (often included in wedding liturgies), the church's theology of marriage centers around the making of covenant vows, which is what makes Christian marriage unique in our secular age. A covenant is a promise to do and/or not do something in relationship with another person. It is not a *quid pro quo* arrangement whereby you do this for me, and I'll do that for you; and if you don't, all bets are off. A covenant is somewhat difficult for people—even lifelong churchgoers—to understand in a consumeristic, contractually litigious society in which people are often treated as objects who suit our needs. A covenant is a solemn pledge to act in a certain way regardless of what the other does. As God covenants to care for us in Christ, so we covenant in Christ to care for one another. And it is God's faithfulness in keeping covenant that gives us hope of being able to keep ours, come what may.

Context of God's Kingdom

Sixteenth-century writer John Lyly said that "marriages are made in heaven, though consummated in yearth."²² Worship opens a portal into the context in which all other contexts exist—the kingdom of God. The Greek word for "kingdom" is *basileia*, which denotes not a place like a realm or kingdom, but rather the sovereign *activity* of God. Every Christian worship service is an eschatological event that takes place in the sovereign realm of God as part of the great communion of saints worshipping

before the throne of God, so to speak—a throne that is moving through our world like the ark of the covenant to bring blessing as well as judgment. Worship participates in praise with all the communion of saints as a kingdom activity, even as it prays that “thy kingdom come” more fully among us. In praise and prayer, we acknowledge and welcome God’s sovereign activity into marriage, and God graciously extends that blessing to us, and through us, to the world. This is why wedding liturgies mention a couple is blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. Marriages do not exist for the couple and consequent family alone; they exist for the greater good of the community as a place in and through which God’s sovereign blessing might be extended to humanity. God’s loving of us and our loving of one another in the light of divine love is a kingdom activity; our imperfect love participates in God’s sovereign activity in the world insofar as it extends divine blessing to one another and others.

God’s kingdom is the ultimate context that preachers seek when they examine all of the contexts present in any given preaching situation. Coming to us incarnate through human exigencies, God’s kingdom is at least potentially present in all contexts. We peer through all contexts in order to glimpse and help others see the larger context in which all of creation exists. We preach so that by glimpsing the divine glory of what in the world God is up to, we can invite others to get in on the divine activity on Christ’s behalf.

By now it is clear that preachers need to do considerable theological and homiletical work when preparing the wedding sermon. By examining the various contexts in which the wedding occurs and prayerfully discerning what God wants us to speak at this particular wedding in light of the overall message of the gospel, the pastor can preach a sermon that helps couples keep covenant in a world where sin constantly threatens to undo God’s good intentions for us. Indeed, it’s important to preach at a wedding, proclaiming the good news among all the bad about marriage: In Jesus Christ, we can care for one another as we live under the sovereign way of Christ, the Lord of all Life and Love, and in so doing, find the love, joy, care, comfort, and mutual satisfaction our hearts so deeply desire. Given this good news we’ve been called to share with the world, how can we not preach at weddings?

Notes

1. William H. Willimon, “The Promise of Marriage,” *The Christian Ministry* 17, 3 (May 1986), 8.
2. William Willimon, “Cleaning Up the Wedding,” *Christian Century* (June 6–13, 1979), 653.
3. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2005), W-4.9003. “The Cumberland Presbyterian Church/Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America views a Christian service of marriage as a corporate worship experience” as well, as explicated in Directory for Worship, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, III.B, accessed online at www.cumberland.org/gao/confession/worship.htm.
4. For more on preaching as being one of the central traits of the Reformed tradition, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 171.
5. *Book of Order*, W-4.9004.
6. For more on historical Reformed thought on how church and state are related in the performance of weddings, see Howard L. Rice and James C. Huffstutler, “The Wedding,” in *Reformed Worship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 151–165.
7. *Book of Order*, G-1.000.
8. Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997).
9. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993), 14–15, also uses this notion, and Lucy Hind Hogan fleshes it out in *Graceful Speech: An Invitation to Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 107–120.
10. Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” in *Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition*, Walter R. Fisher, ed. (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 252.
11. Brant Copeland, “Christian Marriage,” in *Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, Peter Bower, ed. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 213.
12. This is a variation on Rod Symmons’ observation that “sometimes a job or hobby of the couple may help to provide a structure for the” wedding sermon. See his booklet, *Preaching at Weddings*, Grove Pastoral Series (Cambridge, England: Grove Books, 2005), 16.
13. Perry Biddle, *Abingdon Marriage Manual* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 35.
14. In his essay “Marriage,” Paul F. Feiler shows how his first meeting with a couple wishing to be wed

conveys his honor at having been chosen to officiate at this important moment in their lives in such a way that they agree to subsequent sessions to explore their relationship together with him so that he might extend his best service to them. See *Celebrating Passages in the Church: Reflections and Resources*, Hugh W. Sanborn, ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 91.

15. See Margaret Gary, “Beating the Wedding-Sermon Blues: A New Look at Intimacy,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 (April 1986): 106–107. Gary offers a good explication of Ephesians 5 to show its egalitarian mandate. See also the Confession of 1967, in Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2005), 9.44.
16. It’s interesting to note how this is changing from the classical comedy form. Instead of a wedding, the ending may be of a couple finally arriving at happiness after the standard earlier mishaps. It seems we are a culture in which marriage is not a happy ending.

17. Amy Bloom, “Pilot,” *State of Mind*, Lifetime TV, July 15, 2007.
18. Pew Resource Center, “As Marriage and Parenthood Drift Apart, Public Is Concerned about Social Impact,” *Social and Demographic Trends Report*, July 2007, accessed online at <http://pewresearch.org/assets/social/pdf/Marriage.pdf>.
19. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship*, “Statement on the Gift of Marriage,” in *Christian Marriage Rites I and II* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 842, 858.
20. *Book of Common Worship*, 893–902.
21. Susan K. Hedahl, *Preaching the Wedding Sermon* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 113–118.
22. John Lyly, *Euphues and his England* [book online] (London: Gabriell Cawood: 1580; accessed July 2, 2007); available from Elizabethan Authors Studies Project: Elizabethan Novels, trans. Barboura Flues, ed. Robert Brazil, www.elizabethanauthors.com/euphues-england-02.htm.