



The Wedding Rite in the New *Christian Worship*

Among the features of *Christian Worship*, the hymnal to be released later in 2021, is a newly composed rite for Christian weddings. This article walks through the new rite while providing some comments and explanations along the way.

Indirectly shaping the wedding rite was the practice of pre-marriage counseling, which is the norm in our synod. Many blessings come from minister, bride, and groom reading and discussing the Word of God in the weeks and months before the wedding. The Rites Committee worked with the knowledge that the hymnal's wedding rite would be building on a foundation laid during pre-marriage counseling. Therefore, while the wedding rite summarizes and refers to many scriptural truths, it assumes that pre-marriage counseling will have already provided a fuller explanation and discussion of these truths.

Now to the wedding rite, the text of which is presented in the indented sections below.

It is assumed that a procession will take place at the beginning of most wedding services. A procession is not mentioned explicitly because it is not a part of the service proper, but a custom that usually precedes the rite itself. Customs for a procession will vary from place to place.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The first words of the rite are those of the baptismal formula. Everything that is about to happen will take place within the sphere of the gracious operation of the Holy Trinity.

The first major section of the rite focuses on several vital scriptural truths. This longer section is placed at the beginning of the rite for several reasons. One is practical. In the marriage rite in the 1993 hymnal,

a narrative section like this one took place after the Scripture readings and sermon. Many ministers, however, found that the section echoed portions of Scripture they had read and perhaps preached on only a few minutes earlier. Since the new rite includes these passages, the minister may not need to reread them but may choose fewer or other readings for the “Scripture Reading” section. A more important reason for this section’s placement is the desire to remind bride, groom, and assembly, at the outset of the service, of the scriptural foundations for Christian marriage. The truths highlighted here emphasize and affirm several points that are often disputed or opposed in the wider world:

- Marriage has been created and instituted by God; it is not merely a human institution.
- God’s design is for marriage to be between one man and one woman.
- The good news about Jesus—a message for bride, groom, and guests—is the animating force in Christian marriage.
- God’s will is that husband and wife live out the principles of headship and submission that reflect the relationship between Jesus and his Church.
- God’s love for husband and wife enables them to love each other.

After the minister states the first of these truths, words from Genesis (2:21–24) demonstrate its scriptural basis.

We are here in the sight of God and his people to rejoice with name and name as they begin their lives as husband and wife. God established marriage at the beginning of time as a blessing to the man and woman he created, and he continues to guide and bless those he unites in marriage. Moses wrote about the marriage of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis:

The LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

The next section locates Christian marriage within the redemptive work of Christ. We remember how the first husband and wife rebelled against the Creator, but also how Jesus redeems from sin. The forgiveness that flows from him can now flow freely from husband and wife to one another. The rationale for this paragraph includes the realization that, among the many wedding guests and attendees, some have not heard the gospel, have not heard it clearly, or have not heard it in a long time. This paragraph, then, expresses the truths of sin and salvation concisely.

Marriage was part of God’s perfect creation, but Adam and Eve rebelled against God and brought sin into the world. Sadly, the tragedy of sin also has affected marriage and the home, but in love God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross to save the world from sin. Through faith in Jesus, God forgives us and unites us to Christ as members of his family.

The next section refers to Ephesians 5. The Rites Committee viewed it as imperative to include this section in the wedding rite. The scripturally defined, God-given roles of husbands and wives have been misunderstood, challenged, and rejected in recent decades. The question facing the committee was not whether to include words from Ephesians 5, but where and how to include them. In the 1993 marriage rite, they were part of the more extensive narrative section that began the “Marriage Rite” portion of the service. The statements of intent by bride and groom included a question to the groom as to whether he intended to “love [his] wife as Christ loved the Church”; then, the bride was asked if she intended to “submit to [her] husband as the Church submits to Christ.” The committee decided to include these words from Ephesians 5 in the section at the beginning of the rite rather than in the statements of intent, so that they can be heard in the context of other scriptural truths about God’s loving design of marriage (the first part of this section), Jesus’s redemption and forgiveness (the second part of this section), and the love of God that empowers love in a marriage (the section that follows). For more on the committee’s rationale, see below.

God intends marriage to reflect the union of Christ and his people. He instructs husbands to imitate the unconditional and self-sacrificing love of Christ. He urges wives to reflect the Christian’s joyful respect and submission to Jesus. St. Paul described this relationship in his letter to the Ephesians:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

The section that follows speaks of love. Attendees expect to hear about love at a wedding ceremony, but many assume that the bride and groom’s love will be at the forefront. As Christians gather for a wedding, however, the love that takes center stage is God’s love for us. This is the love that will forgive and fuel husband and wife in their life together.

Our Savior’s love for us empowers us to love one another. Husbands and wives grow in love as they live in the love of Christ. St. John wrote in his first letter:

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We love because he first loved us.

The concluding paragraph expresses other biblical truths regarding marriage. Among these are the blessings of companionship and, as God wills it, children. Let those entering marriage respect these high and holy purposes.

God intends the union of husband and wife to bring mutual happiness, to offer help and support in times of sadness and joy, and, when it is his will, to provide a home where children can grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore, all who enter marriage ought to do so reverently, thoughtfully, and in keeping with the purposes for which God gave it.

The assembly then joins in prayer, keeping in mind the words of God they have just heard.

Let us pray.

Gracious and eternal God, in the beginning you created man and woman and established marriage by your design and wisdom. Look with favor on *name* and *name*, who come to you seeking your blessing on their marriage. Guide them with your Word, that with genuine faithfulness and unwavering love for one another they may honor and keep the promises they make today; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

A rubric regarding music follows.

Hymns and other music may be included at appropriate places in the service.

The committee considered placing a “Hymn” heading at several points in the service, or several rubrics noting where hymns may be sung. In the end, they decided to print only one catch-all rubric here. This will allow for flexibility; hymns, solos, and instrumental music may all find a place in the wedding service.

Scripture Readings

Sermon

A sermon or brief address may follow.

Since several Scripture sections were read earlier in the service, the minister may choose to read only one or two more at this point, or to read several. He may base the sermon or brief address (the length will reflect the wedding’s circumstances) on one of the Scripture readings, one of the passages in the rite’s opening section, or a free text.

The marriage rite begins with a declaration of intent by groom and bride. This reflects the maxim *consensus facit matrimonium*, “consent makes a marriage,” which summarizes biblical teaching. Bride and groom are invited to testify to their freely given intent to marry.

Marriage Rite

Name and name, you have come here to be united in marriage, which consists in your mutual consent, sincerely and freely given. I invite you to declare this intent in the presence of God and this assembly.

The minister says to the groom: Name of bridegroom, will you have name of bride to be your wife, to live with her in marriage according to the Word of God? Will you love her, honor her, support her, and be faithful to her as long as you both shall live? If so, answer, “I will.”

*The groom responds: **I will.***

The minister says to the bride: Name of bride, will you have name of groom to be your husband, to live with him in marriage according to the Word of God? Will you love him, honor him, support him, and be faithful to him as long as you both shall live? If so, answer, “I will.”

*The bride responds: **I will.***

Groom and bride express their intent to live in marriage with one another “according to the Word of God,” including the words from God they heard earlier in the service. The groom and bride declare their intent to love, honor, and support one another and be faithful to each other—scriptural directives that apply both to husbands and wives.

As noted above, a difference from the 1993 marriage rite is that the words particular to Ephesians 5 are not included in these new declarations of intent. In this rite, the husband is not asked to declare his intent to “love [his] wife as Christ loved the Church,” nor is the bride asked to “submit to [her] husband as the Church submits to Christ.” The new rite aims to let the declaration of intent be simply that—a declaration by groom and bride of their intention to unite in marriage and remain together in accord with God’s Word. Placing the words of Ephesians 5 in the initial section of the rite allows them to be heard in context. In this way, those not familiar with the principles of headship and submission can first encounter them in a way that may help prevent misunderstanding.

One could argue that the “submit” and “love” words from Ephesians 5 ought to be included in these declarations of intent because these words are controversial in our day. There is good reason to ask the bride and groom to assent to these words before all present, and perhaps in this way to spark further conversations about what those words mean. The committee did not object to this feature of the 1993 rite. We want the bride and groom to assent to the principles in Ephesians; we also want them to assent to marriage being God’s institution and to marriage being between one man and one woman, truths which are now just as controversial as “submit” and “love” in Ephesians 5. But the committee decided to place all these scriptural principles early in the rite so that the declaration of intent can be simpler, including in its wording only broader concepts like love and faithfulness.

The minister says to the couple: Join your hands and make your promises to each other.

The groom and bride say in turn:

I, name, in the presence of God and this assembly, take you, name, to be my [wife/husband]: to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts us.

The vows return to a more traditional form with roots in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The minister says to the couple: Exchange rings as a symbol of the lifelong commitment you have made to each other.

The groom and bride exchange rings in turn, saying:

Name, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and faithfulness.

The minister prays:

Lord, pour out your blessing on your servants that they may always remember their solemn promises and, trusting in your mercy, may live in love all their days; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Since name and name have committed themselves to each other in marriage before God and this assembly, I declare that they are husband and wife, in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together, let no one separate.

God the Holy Trinity preserve you in faithfulness, strengthen you in love, and guide you to life's end.

After the vows, the groom and bride exchange rings. After a brief prayer, the minister declares that they are husband and wife. He cites Jesus's words in Matt 19:6, then pronounces a blessing.

Prayer

The following prayer or another prayer is spoken.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, source of love, help name and name to fulfill the promises they have made today and to reflect your unfailing love in their love for each other. Give them kindness and patience, affection and understanding, happiness and contentment. Encourage their family and friends to support them in difficult days, that their love for each other may continue to grow as long as they live.

Gracious Father, in your goodness you bring people together into families and enrich their lives with abundant blessings. Renew the love of husbands and wives, parents and children,

that they may strengthen and support one another on the way that leads to our heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer

The above prayer comes from the rite in the 1993 hymnal. The first petitions are for the new husband and wife, and the second paragraph expands the prayer to include families everywhere. The wording of the Lord's Prayer (traditional or contemporary) is chosen in advance.

Blessing

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look on you with favor and + give you peace.

Amen.

The Aaronic Blessing concludes the rite. The minister addresses these words to all who are present, but especially to the newly wedded husband and wife.

The customary recessional is assumed though no rubric is included. The bride and groom, consulting with the minister and accounting for the ceremony's location, will determine in advance how to recess and continue with the celebration.

May this wedding rite, used in conjunction with pastoral counseling and care, be a blessing to many brides and grooms in years to come.

This article is from the Spring 2021 issue of Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (Vol. 118, No. 2). The author, Jonathan Micheel, teaches homiletics and church history at the seminary. Before joining the faculty in 2020, he served churches in Salt Lake City, UT, and Modesto, CA, and served as the Nebraska District Worship Coordinator. He is chairman of the Rites Committee of the WELS Hymnal Project.