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Why a church wedding?

Truth telling about Christian marriage

May 12, 2014 by [B. J. Hutto](#)

Attracting the ire of older church members is never a pleasant experience for a pastor. My friend Matthew found this out when a young woman who had grown up in his church wanted to return to it for her wedding. She and her fiancé agreed to participate in pastoral counseling sessions, but when they met together with the pastor, problems arose. The young woman became uncomfortable when Matthew asked her why she wanted to be married in the church. The young man was candid about not being a believer. As they talked, Matthew learned that the idea of a church marriage was not theirs; the bride's mother had suggested it.

The couple didn't object to getting married in her family's old church; in fact, they found the idea a little romantic. But they weren't particularly interested in a church wedding as Matthew described it. He told them that he would marry them, but only after more extensive conversations about Christian marriage and Christianity itself: a community shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were offended and left. Matthew spent the rest of his week dealing with parents, aunts, and church members who could not understand why he'd turn down an opportunity to serve a young couple.

Before considering Matthew's point of view in this situation, I want to note that I admire this couple's candor. They could have dissembled, nodding their heads through counseling sessions and paying just enough attention during the service to get their lines right. A lot of couples do that. A lot of couples have little interest in the church's understanding of marriage or in subsuming their shared life in the church's life. The young people who came to Matthew were honest enough (if not with the bride's family) to admit their lack of interest. I believe it would be good for both the church and the marrying couples if more couples were honest about their reasons for wanting a "church" wedding.

The truth is that fewer young couples are choosing traditional church weddings. An increasing number of couples choose a small civil ceremony, or a Christian ceremony offsite, or no wedding at all. Many establish a household and a life together without any official civil or religious sanction. These changes in relationships and in commitment decisions feed a growing apprehension that young people are divorcing themselves from the church. If couples are not choosing typical church weddings, doesn't that indicate the marginalization of the church in these people's lives and, by extension, in society at large? And so congregations like Matthew's ask anxiously: Why wouldn't a pastor unquestioningly embrace a couple asking to be married? Why would a pastor pass up a chance to draw a young couple into the church?

But perhaps that's the wrong question. Perhaps the question we should be asking is, What does it mean for a couple to get married in the church? One of my seminary professors once recited the nursery rhyme: "Here is the church, and here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the

people.” Then he added, “Of course, it’s only when you open the doors that you see the church. The church is the community.” Viewed in that light, Matthew did not deny the engaged couple a church wedding but instead offered them one.

We need more pastors who are as bold as Matthew and more couples who are as honest as the one that came to him. Most couples, instead of intending to surround their life together with the stories, blessings, and community of the church, ask for a church wedding for other reasons. They feel obligated by tradition. They want a sanctioning of their relationship. They feel pressure from family and friends.

Often couples want only the style: the church contributes a romantic setting and ceremony. Pastor Janet serves a congregation that has a beautiful building just down the street from a large “contemporary” church. Several times a year an engaged couple from the contemporary church stops by to ask if they can be married in her church’s sanctuary. Janet usually says no. She says no because they want only the setting and because their church is opposed to her church’s theology, its theology of marriage, and even to her ordination as a woman. They have no interest in her church as *church*. And when she says no, they are surprised that “any pastor would do such a thing.”

The honesty of these two pastors is refreshing. It offers a glimpse of a church that is free to claim its identity instead of being taken for granted by the wider society. Matthew and Janet represent a church that’s offering a witness instead of just a service, particularly when the service itself is only an empty introduction to a bigger celebration. In these situations most friends and some family members skip the wedding and show up for the reception. Ministers are asked to simplify the liturgy and shorten their homilies. And while some aspects of the wedding are still cherished—the declaration of intent, the presentation of the bride, the exchanging of vows and rings—others, such as communion, are viewed as irrelevant. If two people are giving themselves to one another as Christ gave himself to the church, however, what could be more relevant than communion?

Stanley Hauerwas says that “Christians are required to love one another—even if they are married. That may be a cruel and even heartless demand,” he says, “but it is nonetheless the way things are if you are a Christian.” Not everyone wishes to make so reckless a commitment, and not everyone is ready to. Because of this, the biggest issue related to fewer church weddings is not the loss of the Christian ceremony, but the loss of Christian community. Pastors miss the opportunity to counsel couples who are beginning the hard work of marriage. Churches miss the opportunity to support couples as they begin a life together, and to have their congregation enriched by the couple’s presence. The couples themselves pass up the opportunity to immerse their fledgling marriage in the rhythms and stories of the household of God.

Many Christians believe that everyone who wants to be married in the church should be granted that request, no questions asked. But another story from Pastor Matthew helps challenge that assumption. Matthew has continued to be upfront with engaged couples, telling them that a wedding performed in the church ought to lead to a marriage that’s lived in the church and shaped by the church’s good news. A second couple, who were moderately active in the life of his congregation, wanted to get married. They agreed to the church’s wedding policy and were

open to premarital counseling. But halfway through their counseling sessions, they told Matthew that they had decided to call off their wedding.

Christian marriage, they had come to realize, was not merely dating 2.0. It was not something to do simply because it was what everyone did. It did not promise a lifetime of domestic tranquility and romance. They had come to realize that it was a serious promise, a vow to love their neighbor as themselves even when that neighbor might be an enemy with whom they were sharing a bed. They decided that they needed to discern whether or not they were ready to commit themselves to a Christian marriage. Matthew supported them in this courageous decision and helped them explain it to their families and friends.

A year later the couple returned to him ready to make the commitment, and Matthew noticed that their second engagement with one another—both inside and outside of their counseling sessions—had a depth and a clarity that had been lacking before.

Matthew offers a bold witness, not only because he expects couples married in his church to immerse themselves in church life, but also because he expects those who aren't interested in doing this to be truthful about it, and he understands that he and the church must respect their truthfulness. His convictions about Christian marriage will probably anger more parishioners and families, but the couples that he counsels are receiving a great gift: the opportunity to have their love for each other shaped by Christ and his love for the church.

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- [pastoral leadership](#)
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- [young adults](#)



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Author

B. J. Hutto

B. J. Hutto is a Baptist minister. He lives in New York City.

Comments

[Thank you](#)

Posted by steve7193 on May 16, 2014 - 07:13 pm.

Dear Pastor Hutto,

Your words above in "Why a church wedding?" are well-thought and moving. Thank you.

Peace,

Steve Cornwell

[church wedding](#)

Posted by newc on May 19, 2014 - 03:12 pm.

I certainly commiserate with the hard situations described above. I vacillate between accepting all comers based on some mysterious movement of the Holy Spirit in drawing a couple to our "church," and wanting to thrash them (in Christian love, of course) based on their presumption in thinking they can "use" us in this way. Thankfully, our congregation's governing body, as most governing bodies, has a wedding policy that complements our denomination's order and practice. It's some help to be able to cite those documents. I find so often that what a couple/family really wants is simply a building rental, but I still can't get my head around being a "rent-a-pastor" -- by the hour, of course: feels too much like prostitution! It's a dilemma we'll continue to face.

Rev Nancy W Carle

[Church wedding](#)

Posted by ErinThomas on Jun 03, 2014 - 09:19 pm.

You did not mention the number one reason young people in our town (Riverside, CA, southern California) with 200 churches, many who are non-denominational in warehouses, elementary schools and gymnasiums get married in a church. When it comes to getting married, our concrete PCUSA cathedral church with its stained glass windows is right out of the movies. They may (or may not) attend church regularly but they have a set image of what a church looks like.

My biggest difficulty is with music selections. We give them a number of traditional selections that are beautiful and reverent, but inevitably they want a current popular one with lyrics that talk all about the couple and how they need each other. It is a challenge to explain to them that this is a WORSHIP service and we are not worshipping you....

We do have a stated policy that they read online before they even come in to meet with our coordinator, but it is sometimes an uphill battle from there. The couples that I love to marry

(most of whom are not members) are the ones who grew up in a church or at least attend and understand the part about it being a worship service.

Most of the weddings I do now also have children involved or people already living together with children. No one is the same anymore. Blended families is an understatement.

The counseling sessions are one thing I insist upon if only to have an opportunity to lift up any issues that might be present that they wouldn't otherwise have a chance to examine.

Relationships are different and so weddings are too. But there are some elements that we cannot compromise on, or why do them at all?

Erin Thomas

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[Sherman Bishop](#) · [Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, OH](#)

When a couple not connected to the congregation (and some who are) come in to talk with me about a wedding, one of the first questions I ask is, "Why a wedding in a church, and why a Christian pastor officiating?" I'm very upfront with them that I want an honest conversation, and their answers to those questions will not cause me to say no to their request. I tell them that the promises they make are very important and I don't want them to make those vows in a setting that is not reflective of who they are, nor do I want to participate in a ceremony that has questionable meaning to them. I phrase this as, "I want you to feel great integrity in your marriage, and I want to participate without compromising my faith and values." I promise them that if they need me as a "justice of the peace" I will work with them to design a ceremony that is reflective of who they are as a couple. This has led to great conversations about spirituality, commitment and living in community. In some cases we have designed a service and moved it off site. In others, while they are not members of any faith community, they do have a sense of spirituality and we have honored that in the service they requested.

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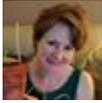


[Darrell Reine](#) · [Minister](#) at [United Church of Canada](#)

Interesting.....I have had requests from the denomination that disagrees with our theology. I finally had to tell one demanding mother that the old historical hotel down the

street was pretty too. I also look at presiding at these weddings as an opportunity to plant seeds of faith. And often we see the couple back with their children to baptised and we have actually had some more than once or twice.

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[Tiffany McCafferty](#)

Wow. And also, filing this away for future reference!

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[Jim Vickers](#) · Top Commenter · [Pastor](#) at [Erickson Lutheran, Onanole United, Waldersee Christ Lutheran Churches](#)

I will marry someone not from our congregation, but only if they do marriage prep with me so I can teach them some relationship skills as well as give them and their friends theological underpinning for their relationship.

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[Caryl Marsh](#) · [Canon - St. Mark's Cathedral](#) at [Retired Episcopal Priest](#)

Thank you for an insightful article. While I am now "retired" in the past I have had similar concerns and had similar responses from family and friends. One young couple decided to marry while parenting an egg during a marriage class in high school. During the counseling sessions they decided that they couldn't make the necessary commitment but were afraid to tell their families. I helped them to do that and the marriage did not take place.

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[Donald Sensing](#) · [Follow](#) · Top Commenter

All too often, people see pastors as "wedding mercenaries" who officiate ceremonies on demand. I have actually had an engaged couple demand to use the sanctuary of the church I was serving to host their *pagan* wedding ceremony - and they were very angry when I declined!

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