

PASTORAL WEDDING POLICY
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Biblical and Theological Rationale for a Christian Wedding

The events surrounding a marriage create an exciting time. In the midst of all the excitement, it is important for an engaged couple to think seriously about the meaning of marriage, and to do so from a Christian perspective. The wedding marks the pledging of their vows of love and faithfulness to each other in the presence of God and human witnesses. As such, a Christian wedding is truly a worship service. I offer the following biblical and theological principles as a rationale for a Christian wedding.

- (1) Marriage is ordained and instituted by God, and is his gift to humanity, given for our welfare and benefit (Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:1-9). It is a covenant of companionship between one man and one woman. Because this gift involves physical as well as emotional companionship, sex outside the bond and boundaries of marriage (fornication or adultery) is an abuse of God's gift and therefore is sinful (Exodus 20:14; Romans 13:8-14; Hebrews 13:4). The Christian ethic has always been chastity outside of marriage, fidelity within marriage.
- (2) Since it is God's institution and gift, from a Christian perspective, marriage must be entered on God's terms rather than our own.
- (3) God's intention and ideal for marriage are for one man and one woman to be committed exclusively to each other until death parts them (Matthew 19:4-6). The only relationship that is to take precedence over that of husband and wife is one's relationship with God. No human being is to come between husband and wife; there must be fidelity in the fullest sense, emotionally as well as physically.
- (4) The relationship between Christ and his church is the model for Christian marriage (Ephesians 5:21-33).

Thus the wedding ceremony that I use is a *worship* service, recognizing that God is the author and giver of the good gift of marriage. It emphasizes the origin of marriage as God's institution, submission to his terms which are reflected in the model of Christ and his church, the nature of marriage as a covenant of companionship, and the total commitment of husband and wife before God. It stands as a witness of the couple's faith and commitment to God and each other, and of their desire to glorify God by their life together as husband and wife.

Pastoral Guidelines for Officiating at Wedding Services

When a couple asks me to marry them, I count it an honor. If they desire to have the kind of service described above (understanding its biblical and theological bases), and are willing to participate in premarital counseling, I am happy to preside over the pledging of their marriage covenant. However, there are times when, as a matter of pastoral conviction and personal integrity, I must refuse to officiate at a wedding. Therefore, I first give the couple a tentative "Yes," but reserve

the right to withdraw from performing the service if I find I cannot do so in good conscience. I follow the guidelines listed below in making this decision. They are based on years of pastoral experience and reflection on biblical, theological, and ethical issues related to marriage.

- (1) If a couple is unwilling to participate in appropriate premarital counseling with me or another minister, I cannot officiate at their wedding. This counseling usually involves three or four sessions, depending on circumstances. I try to be flexible in scheduling the sessions. In a very few limited, extreme circumstances (such as the imminent death of a parent or other family member), I may do the counseling after the actual wedding. With older couples, fewer sessions may be required.
- (2) If, in the process of counseling, (a) an issue or issues arise that present a legal or moral impediment to the marriage, or (b) on the basis of our discussions there does not seem to be the prospect of a healthy marriage, or (c) the level of commitment or the intent of the marriage seems questionable, I will exercise my right to withdraw from performing the service.
- (3) If there are significant religious differences which may be detrimental to the faith and spiritual well-being of either the bride or groom, or children that may be born to them in the future, I reserve the right to withdraw from performing the ceremony.
- (4) If a couple is living together before marriage, I cannot officiate at the wedding while they are cohabitating. The *one exception* to this policy is if such a couple comes to me expressing remorse and repentance, and wants to be married *immediately*. In such a case I will gladly help them right the wrong, and perform the service in my study or a home, etc., then counsel with them after the marriage. I offer two options to cohabitating couples who do not wish to be married immediately:
 - If they will separate until after the wedding, as a demonstration of their recognition that such an arrangement is outside God's will, and as a fruit of their repentance, I will officiate at the wedding.
 - They may go to a magistrate for a civil wedding, then I will preside over a service recognizing and blessing their marriage at a later date.

In the case of cohabitating couples, the most redemptive thing I can do as a minister of the Gospel is to pronounce God's judgment on sin, and seek to persuade the couple to repent and rectify their situation. To pretend that there is not a problem and perform a Christian wedding in the sanctuary of the church would be a mockery of the sacredness of the marriage covenant and of the church's blessing on it, and of my sacred charge as a minister.

- (5) In the case of couples where one or both parties have been divorced, I will decide on a case by case basis after I have heard the circumstances of the divorce(s) and determined to what extent the parties have or have not dealt with any lingering issues that may have a detrimental effect on the new marriage.
- (6) Since the biblical and historic Christian theological understanding of marriage is the union of one man and one woman, I cannot officiate at a "same-sex marriage."