

Do the Scriptures Authorize Church Wedding Ceremonies?

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Definitions

Scriptures: “the expressed will and harmonized word of God, as revealed in the sixty-six books of the Bible in general and the New Testament (NT) in particular.”

Authorize: verb (1) empower; to give a right to someone to do something
(2) to afford a ground for; to warrant, justify

Church: the Lord’s body, for our purposes - a recognizable assembly of Christians (who meet at agreed times in a particular geographical locality, in order to worship and serve the Lord, by whose gospel they were born of water and of Spirit into His kingdom.)

Wedding: noun (1) a marriage ceremony or the ceremony together with the associated celebrations.

Introduction

‘Do the scriptures authorize’ seek to ascertain *if the word of God approves, not merely require or permit something* [e.g. God authorizes an individual to be baptized for salvation while he authorizes the government to arrest and deal with criminals. Nevertheless effecting citizens’ arrest of criminals is approved by secular law; an individual is permitted to do so when able and the state is indifferent whether one is baptized. Also, departure of a spouse from a partner because of religious differences though recognized is not required by God or by the state; marital separation is reluctantly permitted, not really approved.] Authority is needed to exercise dominion (Mt 20:25), to set standards, to define what should be done, what is acceptable or not (Mt 8:9) so as to prevent chaos and confusion (Judges 21:25, 1 Cor 14:33). Source of authority must be ascertained (Mt 21:23-27), *is it from God or from men?* (Mt 15: 3,9). We must establish from the scriptures, the authority for our spiritual beliefs and religious deeds -1 Tim 3:14-15, 2 Tim 3:16-17 vs Gal 1:8-10, Rm 16:17-18 and 1 Cor 4:6, 2 Jn 9. Respecting Bible authority is the means by which, we ‘*walk by the same rule*’ and ‘*speak the same thing*’, to ensure unity and avoid division (Phil 3:16, 1 Cor 1:10). Authority is established from scripture in several ways:

1. Direct Statements e.g. commands, rhetorical questions, imperatives, declared eternal truths, etc.
2. Approved Account of Action or “Examples” of the apostolic era and messianic illustrations for this age.
3. Necessary Inference -refers to implication that follows logically from Bible text, context and a situation.
4. Expediency -when obligation to obey divine requirements indicate liberty to discretionally select a more beneficial option out of several viable alternatives.

Note: Some say God’s silence does not necessarily authorize or prohibit. I reason that since the Bible addresses all that pertain to life and godliness, it isn’t really silent on any issue. Such matters of seeming silence may be redressed by application of godly principles. It is the specificity and exclusivity of scriptures on a matter that forecloses human opinion and alternatives (Heb 7:11-14). If the Bible enjoins a way for doing something then it should be obeyed e.g. being buried in water during baptism. Definition aside, we see commands, examples and inferences of baptism as immersion in water whereas using a pool, river, certain water which wholly covers the subject or a baptistery are expedients -Mk 1:5, Jn 3:23, Acts 10:47-47, 8:36-39, Rm 6:3-5, Eph 4:5

The words “wedding, marriage, married and marry” occurs collectively 78 times in 67 verses in the KJV Bible. Biblically, “*marriage*” means *the union of a man and a woman as one in a [divinely] covenanted relationship primarily for companionship and secondarily for sexual gratification, purity and procreation*. It is a state of wedlock or matrimony; the act and status of a man and a woman in becoming and remaining husband and wife to each other. -Gen 2:18-25, Rm 7:1-3. It involves:

- **preparation**, which requires maturity/stability emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially, financially and spiritually
- **an agreement** of giving, receiving and accepting in love,
- **a celebration**, or public wedding proclamation with or without a feast/party for family/well-wishers
- **a consummation**, or conjugal / sexual intimacy
- **a consolidation**, or building a new family-home with or without children

Marriage is the enacted relationship between two persons whereas wedding is the enacting moment of the union for others to be properly aware. The marriage covenant (formal binding agreement) is always witnessed by God (Mal 2:14-16) who actually joins the duo together though the two physically join to each other in sexual intercourse to be one flesh -Mk 10:6-9. Weddings are prevalent in all cultures in every land, amongst all nations; peoples and languages. The scriptures give us information and illustrations on it. When such is followed as a guide, we will be pleasing unto God. It is presumptuous to assume the church today may legislate thereon probably because the Lord forgot to reveal something necessary for our learning and practice.

Thesis

To organize or execute weddings is for individuals in their private capacities, it is **not** one of the duties the Lord has given His church. Once family requirements (e.g. mutual respect / gifts exchange) and divine eligibility criteria (e.g. not currently married to another or wrongfully divorced -to avoid adultery, not a close relation -to avoid incest, not premised on deception of health in mind or body -to avoid sexual deprivation or childlessness) are met, a marriage could be contracted. Scripturally, people make marriages by the giving out of a woman and her taking by the groom as his wife at a *wedding* ceremony. When 'given in marriage,' authority or headship over a woman is transferred from her father / guardian to her husband -1 Cor 11:3; (4:15 & 2 Cor 11:2).

“And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife.

***If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins.”** - Exo 22:16-17 (Deut 22:29)*

*“And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: Neither shalt thou **make marriages** with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.”* -Deut 7:2-3

*“Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; **and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands**, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.”* - Jere 29:6

*“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which **made a marriage** for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were **bidden to the wedding**: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: **come unto the marriage.**”* -Mt 22:2-4

*“For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, **marrying and giving in marriage**, until the day that Noe entered into the ark.”* -Mt 24:38,

*“So then he that **giveth her in marriage** doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better”* -1 Cor 7:38.

When families voluntarily give and take a bride it is generally termed Traditional or *Customary* marriage. Those who wish to formally register their union with government for legal purposes (due to potential custody, property or inheritance issues, etc.) are free to do so, based on the National Marriage Act or operational civil law of their territory, at a designated registry office or religious denomination *licensed* to celebrate marriages by the government authority. Formalization at the Registry does not amount to a repetition of a conducted wedding!

In the Bible, payment of dowry and exchange of gifts takes place at a father-in-law's place not at the house of God or altar. Recall the marriage of Isaac, Jacob, Samson, David, etc? See also Gen 34:12, Ex 22:17, 1 Sam 18:25. The practice of giving in marriage is seen in Gen 16:3, 25:20, 26:34, Josh 15:16-17, Judges 21:1,7, 1 Sam 18:17-27 & 25:44. This culture is pervasive in Israel and even in Egypt and other lands -Genesis 41:45,1 Kings 11:19, 2 Chronicles 25:18. More examples:

- Isaac (Gen 24), Jacob (Gen 29:20-22), Shechem (Gen 34: 3-19). Samson (Judges 14:2-10)
- The parable of Jesus in Mt 22 that “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son. And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come... Behold, ***I have*** prepared ***my*** dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage...”
- In John 2:1-11, Mary, Jesus and his disciples were at a wedding ceremony in Cana **as invited guests.** Jesus as Christ and his followers were not officiators at that event which has lessons for the church today. It was a social gathering / party hosted by the groom and not a religious affair at the temple or synagogue.
- Jesus further indicated this must have been so with his parable in Luke 14:8-10 “When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.”

To neglect these Bible pattern on weddings and claim there is no information on how early Christians married, is laughable. The Lord Jesus from the beginning emphasized the spiritual nature of his kingdom. He revealed that it is not worldly in origin, nature and purpose -Mt 16:15-19, Jn 18:36-37. We enter the kingdom via a spiritual birth (Jn 3:1-7, Acts 2:37-47) to obtain all spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph 1:3 & 2:19-22). The church of Christ constitute a spiritual house (1 Tim 3:15, Heb 3:6, Acts 20:28) offering spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet 2:5), partake of spiritual teachings (1 Cor 2:13), spiritual songs (Eph 5:19) and spiritual meals (Rm 14:17, 1 Cor 10:1-4, 16-17). The body of Christ should demonstrate it is made up of spiritual people (1 Cor 3:1-3; 6:16-17), engaged in spiritual warfare (2 Cor 10:3-5, Eph 6:10-13), spiritual reign (Eph 2:1-6), expecting spiritual rewards (Jn 17:1-3, 2 Cor 5:1-4). **Our aim is to glorify God in spiritual worship and service (Jn 4:21-24, Eph 3:10-21, Rm 12:1-2); the scriptural work of the church includes Evangelism of the world, Edification of the saints and Benevolence to the needy.** Unfortunately, there have always been suggestions and efforts to invest her collective resources in ventures outside those divinely mandated. One such venture is **organizing and conducting** wedding ceremonies as a church function and religious service. The onus is on advocates of ‘*church wedding*’ to show us where and how the scriptures authorize this modern act. Some try to justify it by asserting: “*I think it is good not wrong, where is it condemned in the Bible? After all government permits it and denominations are doing it, we feel it is getting us desired results, etc.*” However, as Christ’s disciples we must realize that human imagination and sentiments are not authoritative irrespective of their allure.

The Biblical Role of the Church in Marriage

1. To teach God’s will on the subject in order to instruct, edify and counsel –Acts 20:20, 1 Thess 1:8, 2 Tim 2:16, Rm 15:4. For example, Ezra (10) was a teacher who taught the Israelites on marriage, Malachi taught the priests on it (2:14-16), John the Baptist taught Herod on same Mt 14:3-5. Jesus taught on marriage (Mt 19:1-12) and so did his apostles (1 Cor 7, Eph 5:22-33, Rm 7:1-3, 1 Tim 4:1-3, 1 Pet 3:1-7)
2. To rejoice with those who rejoice -Rm 12:15. The presence of the church’s representative to witness a wedding, even without preaching or giving a gift, would encourage the couple. It amounts to an expedient act of fellowship. If capable and when given the privilege, such church representative could pray or exhort the audience. Those spiritual activities would be incidental and not the main purpose of that gathering -1 Cor 10:27; 12:26; 15:58. [We also mourn with others and have scriptural authority to be involved in a member’s burial -Mt 8:21-22, Mk 6:29, Jn 19:38, Acts 5:6,10; 8:1-2; 9:36-41; 14:19-20; 20:7-12]
3. To discipline those who live in sexual and marital sins -1 Cor 5, 1 Tim 5:8

4. To encourage members to set good examples with their conduct or behavior and to keep godly homes –Prov 31:10ff, 1 Tim 3:1-12 & 5:8, Titus 2:3-5. Our salvation and societal well-being may be affected by it but the scriptural local church organization truly depends on it!

The Modern Concept of “Church Wedding”

Wikipedia: “A wedding is a ceremony where two people are united in marriage... Most wedding ceremonies involve an exchange of marriage vows by the couple, presentation of a gift (offering, ring(s), symbolic item, flowers, money), and a public proclamation of marriage by an authority figure... Most Christian churches give some form of blessing to a marriage; the wedding ceremony typically includes some sort of pledge by the community to support the couple's relationship. ***A church wedding is a ceremony presided over by a Christian priest or pastor.*** Ceremonies are based on reference to God, and are frequently embodied into other church ceremonies.” Example: Catholic format is at <http://catholicweddinghelp.com/index.htm>

Anglican at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/pastoral/marriage/marriage.aspx>

A church marriage ceremony is a wedding planned, organized, and executed by a church utilizing in whole or in part, its resources such as doctrines / creeds / procedures, officials, members, materials, funds, time etc.

It presumes God will specially recognize and bless a marital union when the event is directed by a church official according to prescribed church rites in their meeting place and presence.

It entails announcing and calling for possible objection, fixing a mutually agreeable date with the intending couple for a religious service, proclaiming them as married prior to or via the religious service, possibly issuing them a marriage certificate under government regulation, etc. Most denominational Preachers claim to join the duo and say: “I now proclaim you man and wife!” Most coC Preachers don’t do that but claim the two were already married at a prior date. If so, of what essence is the so-called ‘church wedding’?

Excerpt of ‘*Celebration of Marriage*’ clauses of **Marriage Act of Nigeria 1990**; Laws of the Federal Republic
21. *Marriage may be celebrated in any licensed place of worship by any recognised minister of the Church, denomination or body to which such place of worship belongs, and according to the rites or usages of marriage observed in such church, denomination or body: Provided that the marriage be celebrated with open doors between the hours of eight o'clock in the forenoon and six o'clock in the afternoon, and in the presence of two or more witnesses besides the officiating minister.*

22. *A minister shall not celebrate any marriage if he knows of any just impediment to such marriage, nor until the parties deliver to him the registrar's certificate or the licence issued under section 13 of this Act.*

23. *A minister shall not celebrate any marriage except in a building which has been duly licensed by the Minister, or in such place as the licence issued under section 13 of this Act, may direct.*

26. *The certificate shall then be signed in duplicate by the officiating minister, by the parties, and by two or more witnesses to the marriage. The minister having also signed his name to the counterfoil, he shall sever the duplicate certificate therefrom, and he shall deliver one certificate to the parties, and shall within seven days thereafter transmit the other to the registrar of marriages for the district in which the marriage takes place, who shall file the same in his office.*

Some pertinent questions arise for our consideration:

- **Is it mandatory that a wedding must hold as ‘church marriage’? No, the word “may” in Clause 21 shows it is voluntary not mandatory.**
- **Is the church of Christ a denomination? No, “we ought to obey God rather than men,” especially when government or anyone (even a member) gives an idea or directive that disregards the word of God.**
- **Who would qualify as a recognized minister of the church to legally conduct a wedding? Evangelists and possibly Pastors / Deacons only, none else! It is based on their official capacity.**

- Can a minister hold such wedding ceremony in any arbitrary place? **No, only in *already designated or licensed place such as a meeting venue of his particular denomination.***
- Since a *church wedding* must statutorily be held “*according to the rites or usages of marriage observed in such church, denomination or body,*” what are the published rites of marriage of church of Christ-Nigeria and from where is it derived? **From observations, it seems there is no unified standard at the moment, the rites being used are *adaptations by various congregations from the denominations.* Such churches may soon clamor to conduct thanksgiving, naming, birthday & graduation ceremonies, etc.**

If Church Wedding Is Scripturally Authorized Then:

1. The function becomes an OBLIGATION for all members to support and participate in, just as any other church service or business meeting.
2. It would be inappropriate for Christians (especially a family of believers giving out a daughter in marriage) not to undertake *church wedding*.
3. Any member’s absence at a *church wedding* amounts to forsaking the assembly, such habit should attract discipline (especially as weddings are mostly held on a weekend; a work-free-day for non self-employed).
4. Partiality and preferential sitting arrangement should not take place at the assembly during the program - James 2:1-4. How do you reconcile this inspired command with the instruction of Christ in Luke 14:8-10?
5. The congregation, not the couple’s families will regulate the activities at the venue. If the reception is held within church premises, may ‘kiss the bride,’ playing of (instrumental) music and dancing, etc. take place?
6. Though the meeting hall is not the church and could be given out for godly purposes, circumspection is needed to avoid controversies and wrong perceptions / impressions by members, visitors and neighbours. [Bro. Jobalo Oshikanlu asks - “*How do you justify allowing use by one brother and turning down another (or how do you deal with the sentiments that will arise from the differences of opinion amongst Christians of varying levels of spiritual development when one person was allowed to use the hall and another was turned down)? How do you deal with 2 or more brethren needing the hall at the same time; or where church property is damaged by unidentified guests or alcohol or drugs are consumed in the premises without approval of the brother or sister who borrowed use of the hall, or where a fight or quarrel broke out amongst guests or workers?*”]

Conclusion

The NT has no record of a ‘*church wedding*,’ this indicates the Lord has not contemplated it and neither should we. Marriage ceremonies are essentially personal, private matters for the individuals, their families and invitees. It is not a function for the church and is not part of her scriptural work to organize or execute, she could advise and pray for couples before, during or after a wedding. Calling saints to celebrate with you is vastly different from the church claiming authority to perform the marriage ceremony. [I personally commend the family of Sister Sarah Roberts for her first daughter’s wedding. The major aspects took place in one day at same venue –a rented hall in UNILAG. Both families were around for exchange of customary gifts. The brethren were there to celebrate and rejoice with them. A brother gave an exhortation. Songs of praise were rendered alongside traditional wedding songs. Several people prayed. The officials of the registry who were invited coordinated the signing of the Marriage Register when they witnessed the dad hand over his daughter to the groom. There was eating, drinking and dancing at the event. It was primarily a social event not a religious service or church function. The family had absolute control over their wedding program which they organized and conducted it in an honourable manner.]