

DOES THE SCRIPTURE AUTHORIZE "CHURCH MARRIAGE CEREMONIES"?

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A. Introduction

This is a personal response to the argument that “Church Marriage” ceremonies are unscriptural.

Marriage is one of the three and only divine institutions in the human society. The only divinely established institutions on earth are marriage/the home, the government and the church. Besides these, all other institutions are man-made. This response is therefore important as it concerns two of the most important institutions on earth. The topic can be rephrased thus, 'To What Extent Can the Church Be Involved in Marriage Ceremonies?'

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B. Definition of Terms

- a. **“Scripture”**: (noun) “Holy Book” or “Authoritative statement”.
- b. **“Authorize”**: (verb) “To grant power or permissions”.
- c. **“Church”**: (noun); “Christians collectively seen as a single spiritual community”.
- d. **“Marriage”**(noun); “A union of two or more people that create a family tie and carries out legal or social rights and responsibilities”

Note: All definitions are retrieved from the “Dictionary English” App.

C. HOW TO ESTABLISH SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY:

Since the argument has a lot do with scriptural authority. It is necessary to first of all define what constitutes scriptural authorization. The bible is God’s word. It contains God’s laws to man. God qualifies to give us laws because he is our creator.

God’s laws are issued in form of direct commands, declarative statements and necessary inferences. Some contend that “approved apostolic examples” qualify as God’s laws and are therefore on the same pedestal with the aforementioned forms of divine laws. But here, I will argue that examples do not qualify as divine laws.

1. Direct commands; These are imperative statements that are divine. Direct commands states clearly what action God want his children to carry out For example “... *repent...* “(Acts 2:38) is a direct

command. Direct commands are the most common way God directs the lives of his children. For this reason, fundamental requirements for salvation are issued as direct commands.

2. Declarative Statements; A declarative statement is a statement of fact that must be believed. A declaration is not a command per say but any action that demonstrates disbelief in it amounts to disobedience to God. For example, Jesus says "... *I am the way*" (Jn.14:6). That is a declaration. Anyone who disbelieves that Jesus Christ is the only way to God commits sin and cannot be saved. Declarative statements therefore stand as God's laws.

3. Necessarily Inferences; These are truths that are not directly or clearly stated in a passage but can be deduced from the facts available in that passage and/or other passage(s) through balanced logical reasoning. Such passages call for our exercise of human intellectual capabilities. For an inference to be necessary, it must be valid. This means that conclusions reached by deductions are correct beyond every reasonable doubt. For example, Genesis 1:1 states that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth". From this passage, we can deduce that for God to create the heavens and the earth, He has been before the beginning. In other words, God is before all things. This fact is buttressed by some other passages of scripture. But because for some reasons, people will not always be reasonable in their deductions, the deductions are sometimes unbalanced. Therefore God does not reveal fundamental truths through necessary inferences. One must therefore be cautious in the application of necessary inferences. They must not be made the bases for Christian unity.

4. Examples; Examples serve several purposes in God's communication to man. Such as teach (1Co.10:11). Examples motivate (2Cor.9:2). Examples warn (Jd.7, Hb.4:11) etc. In a nutshell, examples clarify commands. *But examples do not qualify as divine laws.* Consider the following:

a. 1Peter2:21; 22 states that Jesus' life is an example to us. This does not mean that we are bound to replicate everything that Jesus did. It does mean that we should apply His principles in our daily lives. If following Jesus' examples means replicating His deeds, then every one of us must literally give our bodies to be crucified on crosses. The passage also states that Jesus was sinless. It therefore implies that we too must be sinless.

In John 13: 5-15, Jesus literally washed the feet of His disciples. In verse 15, He states that it is an example. If examples are laws, then we must literally wash one another's feet. Failure to do so will amount to disobedience to God.

If examples are laws, then we must party with sinners, pray on mountains, teach in Parables, walk the streets of Jerusalem etc?

b. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says that we should imitate him as he imitates Christ. Paul was celibate (1Cor. 7:7, 9:5). That is an approved example. If examples are laws, then it is binding on every Christian to remain celibate.

In Acts 16:1-3, Paul circumcised Timothy. That is an approved Apostolic example. Should we therefore circumcise people today?

Throughout his missionary journey, Paul travelled by ships, must we therefore travel by ships today? Paul joined the saints in Troas to partake The Lord's Supper in an upper room, must we therefore partake the Lord's Supper in upper rooms for it to be acceptable to God?

The only logical answer to the above questions is an emphatic no! This is because examples are not binding on Christians. Examples are not laws.

c. Act 2:44-45, 4:34-37 state that the early disciples sold their possessions and submitted the proceeds for distribution. That is an approved apostolic example. It is good and worthy of emulation. Christians are permitted to do same today but it is not binding. Christians today are not bound to sell their possessions for distribution to others. For even in the early church when disciples so did, , it was not binding. See Acts 5:4. Ananias and sapphire retained the right to the proceeds of their land sale. It was not compulsory. Because an activity or action was undertaken by an assembly of the early church does not make it binding on Christians today.

The summary of this argument is that examples are not laws An example shows just one way a particular command can be carried out. It does not rule out other ways that the same command can be carried out.

D.OBEYING GOD'S COMMANDS:

1 John 5:3 says *"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome"*. See also John 14:15.

God's commandments are not arbitrary. They are given to foster a loving relationship with him. We must therefore be diligent in obey God's laws... This implies that we must not add or subtract from it (Rv.22:18:19).

Every commandment of God has two important aspects namely the specifics and the genesis.

a. Specifics: This refers to the elements or aspects of a command that are directly and clearly stated. For example, in Genesis 22:1ff, God commanded Abraham to take Isaac to Moriah and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. In that command, God specifies who is to be sacrificed (Isaac) and where he is to be sacrificed (Moriah). Isaac and Moriah are therefore specifics of that command.

Specifics of a command have **"Coordinates"**. Coordinates are possible alternatives to the specifics of a command. However the specifics of a command must not be replaced by any coordinates. Any replacement of the specifics of a command is disobedience to the command. Thus Ishmael (the other son of Abraham) is a coordinate to Isaac (a specified element of the command). Had Abraham taken Ishmael instead of Isaac, it would have resulted in disobedience to the command.

The case of Nadab and Abihu (Lv.10:1; 20) illustrates the above truth. Fire for temple activities is to be obtained in the temple. The source of fire was specified, but they brought in fire from outside the temple. This was described as *"strange fire"*. Their eventual death shows how grave a sin it is to tamper with the specifics of any of God's commands.

b. Generics: This refers to the elements or aspects of a command that are not spelt out but are implied in the command. Thus in God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen: 22), there are elements that are necessary to carry out the command that are not specified. For example, time, means of transportation, type of firewood, type of clothes to wear etc are not specified but are indispensable in carrying out the command. The generic area of every command allows for freedom of choice. Thus Abraham could decide to travel by water, on a donkey, on a horse or even travel by foot without violating the specifics of the command. He could also choose as firewood, mango or Iroko, or Pine or Mahogany. He could also go in the evening afternoon or morning.

The generic areas of every command allow the exercise of our God given discretion. They are areas that allow the expression of opinion. God allows these liberties because He knows that circumstances and opportunities vary from place to place and persons to persons.

Let me buttress the above point using a New Testament command;

"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some. But exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hb.10:25 NKJV).

The above command specifies what is to be done (assemble). It specifies who is to assemble (ourselves; the saints). It also specifies the reason for the assembling (to stir up (edify) one another in love and good works (verse 24). The specifics of this command make it compulsory for Christians to congregate and when they do, they must engage only in activities that stir up love and good works.

But also note that the command does not specify place, time, size, and day of assembly and the list of activities to engage in. Therefore in such areas, there is liberty. That is why we fix the time, choose a place and organize the activities that are observed when we gather. Each assembly is therefore at liberty to design their own list of activities on a particular day. On that list, they could include the celebration of new born baby or the marriage of fellow Christians.

Let me summarize that segment by saying that Christians are free to organize themselves in anyway and organize any activity as far as such does not cause the weak ones to stumble or violate any portion of the scriptures.

There can be no specifics without generics. However, in our exercise of our liberties we must do only things that do not violate scriptures. See Galatians 5:13. The generics are implied in the Specifics and therefore receive equal scriptural authorization with the specifics.

E. Scriptural Authority for Church Marriage:

Having established what constitutes scriptural authority, it should not be difficult to determine if scriptures authorize church marriage ceremonies. What follows is a scripture based affirmation that scripture authorize church marriage ceremonies.

a. Universality of Marriage Ceremonies: All over the world and in every generation, God does not specify who organizes or conducts marriage ceremonies. However, God endorses marriage ceremonies no matter

who organizes or conducts it as far as His specific laws on marriage are respected. I will use the Jews as a study case.

The Jewish marriage ceremony is preceded by "betrothal" the I which is the paying of the dowry by groom's father. The payment of the dowry is a formal way a groom indicates interest in marrying a bride. Betrothal can be done while the groom and bride are still infants or few years or months before the marriage ceremony. The following are the key segments of a Jewish marriage ceremony;

1. **The Procession:** This is the ushering in of the groom into the home of the bride's parents. Virgins who are friends of the bride wait at the entrance for the arrival of the groom and his family members, friends and well wishers. As soon as he and his entourage are sighted, a trumpet is sounded to announce it. The Virgins then arise to usher them in with music. The arrival of the groom usually takes place in the middle of the night. As soon as the procession is over, the gate is shut and the other activities commence. The activities are usually presided over by a honorable person, preferably a rabbi.

2. **Engagement:** This is otherwise known as "vort". This is a formal familiarization of both families at which point they also reach an agreement to let the ceremony go on. They also agree on the roles of each party and individuals during the marriage ceremony. The engagement can be observed days, a week or an hour before the wedding reception.

3. **The Signing of the Marriage Certificate:** The marriage certificate is also known as the "ketuvah" and is signed by each of the couple. This certificate serves as evidence that the couple is married according to law. The signing of the marriage certificate is officially witnessed by at least two witnesses. It is often concluded with light refreshment and a toast.

4. **The Veiling:** The signing of the marriage certificate is followed by the "veiling". In this segment, the groom is ushered with music into a room where the bride is seated, dressed like a queen. The groom literally pulls a veil over her face. According to some Jews, this is a reminder of what happened when Jacob was to marry Rachel but was coerced into marrying Leah also. The veiling is also known as the "*bedeken*" and is followed by the "*Chuppa*" or "the Canopy".

5. **The Canopy:** The groom is accompanied by his father, father in law to be and friends to a tiny decorated house-like canopy where he stands and prays. The canopy is symbolic of a new home. While the groom prays, the bride is accompanied by her mother and her mother in law to be to the canopy where the groom is still praying. As they reach the canopy, she leads them to circle the groom seven times. The seven times is said to be symbolic of the seven days of creation and an assurance of being an emotional fortress to the husband to be. After this, the presiding rabbi prays over a cup of wine which is then offered to the couple to drink.

6. **Giving of the Ring:** Originally, only the man gives a ring (usually a gold ring) to the woman as a symbol of promise to protect her. The rabbi leads him to recite a vow after which he places the ring on one of her fingers. But in modern times, the couple exchanges rings in the same order. This is also known as "*kiddushin*".

7. **Breaking of Glass:** After the giving of the ring, the presiding rabbi leads everyone present to recite prayers over another cup of wine, pronouncing blessings upon the couple, their families and well wishers. The prayer also includes a special prayer that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt. After the prayers, the couple drinks the content of the cup. The groom then breaks a glass by stamping it on the ground. In modern times, an electric bulb is preferred to a glass cup because of the popping sound it makes when stamped. The breaking of the glass is a commemoration of the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It's a unique way of saying "though this is a joyous occasion, we do not forget the sad event of the destruction of our precious temple". At this point, the couple is considered married.

8. **Consummation:** Now that the couple is married, they are ushered into a private room where they are left alone to refresh/eat and engage in a sexual intercourse to seal the marriage. Since the bride is expected to be a virgin till marriage, the couple is expected to emerge from the room with a handkerchief stained with blood as evidence that the bride was a virgin before her first experience of conjugation. This handkerchief is later handed to the bride for safe keeping. This evidence of virginity is important for reference purposes.

Throughout the ceremony, music is played to the entertainment of guests.

After the consummation of the marriage, there may be a feast at the bride's home. Thereafter, the couple is accompanied back to the home of the groom amidst jubilation, music and dancing.

9. **The Marriage Feast:** This marks the culmination of the marriage ceremony. The groom's father organizes a feast which often lasts for seven days.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are no specifics on marriage ceremonies. Marriage ceremonies as detailed above were developed by the Jews over the years. No where are they coded as law under the Old Testament. But it is so interesting that God endorsed these ceremonies. How do we know this?

a. Jesus with His early disciples attended a marriage feast in Cana where He even turned water to wine (John 2:1-10).

b. Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a marriage feast (Matthew 22:1-14).

c. Jesus likened his coming to a marriage ceremony (Matthew 25:1-13)

d. He also likened His coming to a trip back from a marriage ceremony (Luke 16:36).

d. The ultimate and final redemption of the saints is pictured as the marriage ceremony of Christ and His wife (Revelations 19:6-9).

Marriage ceremonies vary from culture to culture and are endorsed by God regardless of who conducts them as far as His specific laws are respected. The Church therefore does not err in conducting marriage ceremonies.

b. “Rejoice with them that rejoice...” (Ro. 12:15)

That is a direct command. Christians are to demonstrate solidarity with one another and celebrate together when occasions call for it. The extent to which the church should be involved in such celebrations is not specified. The one to draw the program is not specified. These are therefore generics. They are matters of liberty and opinion. Any group of Christians are therefore at liberty to go about it whichever way they deem good as far as it does not violate any scriptures. One should not force his opinion down the throat of others. Marriage is an occasion that calls for rejoicing. The church can therefore use such an occasion to come together to pray, sing, admonish one another, eat and drink with the couple. In fact, such a moment is a wonderful opportunity for fellowship. To say otherwise is to attack the liberty of Christians.

c. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31).

“....Let each man have his own wife and let each woman have her own husband”. (1Cor. 7:2)

The first of the two passages above is a declarative statement while the second one is a direct command. Both permit adults to marry. However, marriage implies a process or ceremony. What constitutes this ceremony is not specified and is therefore generic. Every family and community is free to organize the marriage ceremonies however they deem good.

The church is both a family and a community. God expects us to organize the marriage ceremonies of our members. They are at liberty to organize it however they deem good as far as it does not violate any scriptures.

D. Summary: I will summarize by affirming the following points;

1. The permission to marry is divine. And because marriage implies a ceremony, marriage ceremonies are divinely permitted.
2. Examples are not laws. That we cannot find examples of a church conducting marriages in the New Testament does not nullify the liberty of a church to conduct the marriage of her members.
3. Marriage ceremonies do not in any way violate God’s laws on marriage and therefore fall into the area of generics. There are no specifics on who is to organize or conduct the marriage ceremonies. Time, day, place and list activities of the marriage ceremony are also not specified. Christians are therefore free to make choices in those areas. Any attempt to legislate in such areas is to assume the position of a lawgiver. Such an attitude attracts a divine curse (Rv.22:18, 19).
4. The church is commanded to rejoice with her members. The extent to which can be involved in the rejoicing is not specified. Therefore the church can be involved in rejoicing with her member to any extent possible as far as no scripture is violated (Ro.12:15). The church can be involved to any extent in the

marriage ceremonies of her members including organizing and conducting it as far as she does not violate any scripture. No one has the right to put restrictions where the Lord has put none.

5. Marriage ceremonies are worship moments; opportunities to honor our Father who art in heaven. For at such moments we pray, sing, admonish one and even share with one another. Why should anyone deprive us our rights to worship?

Christians everywhere must stand up against any attempt to rob us of our liberty in Christ (Gal. 5:1). Teachers of the word must be careful not to bind where the Lord has not bound. We must speak where the bible speaks and keep silent where the bible is silent.

Thank You and God bless you.

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