

“How to Have a Great Wedding”
Song of Solomon 3:6-11

- I. A great wedding will be a public celebration. 3:6
 - 1. A wedding is a time that should be special.
 - 2. A wedding is a time to make a statement.

- II. A great wedding contains a promise of protection. 3:7-8
 - 1. Marriage provides safety. 3:7
 - 2. Marriage provides security. 3:8

- III. A great wedding includes a pledge of commitment. 3:9-10
 - 1. All that I have belongs to you. 3:9-10
 - 2. All of my love belongs to you. 3:10

- IV. A great wedding has the approval of others. 3:11
 - 1. Our friends will approve.
 - 2. Our family will approve.

“How to Have a Great Wedding”
Song of Solomon 3:6-11

Weddings and marriage for life are out! Cohabitation, trial rules and prenups are in. At least this is the picture you get if you listen to the prophets of popular culture.

Monica Schmidt: “It’s just a piece of paper to me. I consider myself married without that ... There’s more freedom, I’m allowed to do whatever I like.”

John Nielsen: “It’s outmoded. I’m just as committed to the relationship as I would be if I were married.” Claiming to be emotionally abused from his parents divorce and now in therapy John adds, “Anything that comes before my recovery has to go. If I’m not putting myself first, the children are not going to see someone who is looking after themselves.”

Robin Hill, in a cohabiting arrangement: “I’ve got a life too. If I thought ‘oh, this isn’t doing anything for me,’ I’d move on.” When asked about a wedding and marriage she joked, “I thought ‘well, we do need a new toaster!’ but I can’t see the need to be married.”¹

Aline Fesquet and Frank Embert who entered into a “civil solidarity pact” in France: “For us, it is a step forward in our relationship, but without the family and all the baggage.”²

The numbers would certainly indicate cohabiting is the rage of the day. The number of cohabiting couples has risen from 439,000 in 1960 to 4.2 million in 1998.³ With so many adopting this new lifestyle it must be producing some really good results, right? No. Consider the following data:

- 1) Only about one-sixth of live-ins last at least 3 years, and only one-tenth endure 5 years or more.⁴
- 2) Living together before marriage increases the risk of divorce. One study found an increased risk of 46%. Living together outside marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children. One study found that the risk of domestic violence for women in cohabiting relationships was double that in married relationships; the risk is even greater for child abuse. Unmarried couples have lower levels of happiness and well-being than married couples.⁵
- 3) Couples who live together first are more likely to have an affair during marriage than those who don’t.⁶
- 4) Cohabiting couples are more than 3 times likely to say “hitting, shoving and throwing things” occurred between them and their partner the previous year.⁷ Pamela Smock summarizes the situation well, “While common sense suggests that premarital cohabitation should offer

¹ Bettina Arndt, “Cohabitors: The New Breed (*The Age* – Australia, 12-7-99).

² Suzanne Daley, “French Couples Take Plunge That Falls Short of Marriage,” (*New York Times*, 4-18-00), 1A.

³ Debra Gaskill, “Shacking Up Strikes Out” (*Kettering – Oakwood Times*, Dayton, Ohio, 5-2-00).

⁴ Karen Peterson, “Wedded to Relationship but not to Marriage” (*USA Today*, 4-18-00).

⁵ David Popenoe, “Cohabitation: The Marriage Enemy” (*USA Today*, 7-28-00).

⁶ Brian Holman, “Co-habiting First May not Improve Marriage” (*Scripps Howard Foundation Wire*, 8-5-00).

⁷ CMFCE@smarriages.com

couples an opportunity to learn about each other, increasing their chances for a successful marriage, the evidence suggests just the opposite. Premarital cohabitation tends to be associated with lower marital quality and increased risk of divorce.”⁸

So what is the problem? Rita DeMaria, I think, hits the nail on the head when she says, “Being single is a choice that most people do not choose. People want to be married.” However, “some people have never seen a good marriage.”⁹ For far too many, their perspective on marriage can be summed up 1, 2, 3. First comes the engagement ring, then comes the wedding ring, and then comes the suffering. Perhaps the “case against marriage” is really not too hard to understand, given what some people have seen and experienced. This radical skepticism toward God’s divine plan was pointedly addressed by Larissa Phillips in an article entitled “The Case Against Matrimony: If Marriage is Risky, Doomed and Expensive, Why Bother?” She writes,

“Nov. 18, 1999 The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University recently announced the findings of a new study: the marriage rate has dropped 43 percent since 1960, and increasing numbers of young people are choosing to stay unmarried. The U.S. Census Bureau came out with related big news last week: The number of babies born to unwed parents has increased fivefold since the 1930s, owing, for the most part, to more and more couples rejecting marriage, even after the birth of a child. Suddenly everyone is scrambling to understand. Well, I get it, and I didn’t have to scramble to understand. In fact, what interests me is not why the members of my generation (X, if you will) are getting married less, but why anyone is surprised. What did everyone - - i.e., the baby boomers - - expect? As the unmarried mother of a new baby, I am the object of much indignant scrutiny among the older generations, who seem to have conveniently forgotten the past 30 years, in which almost everyone I know has been emotionally pummeled in some way by divorce. As my boyfriend asked at a recent family gathering, while playing a board game in which you have to prompt the other players to supply a particular word: “What must you do before you get married?” The answer, of course: get divorced. My father and his wife thought this was hilarious. And yet aging boomers seem shocked and befuddled that someone would choose to avoid the whole swampy mess of broken vows and failed traditions that they’ve left in their wake. People over 40 flinched with disdain when I first announced my pregnancy. “Oh,” they would exclaim, barely masking their disapproval. “And ... what do your parents think?” They struggled to understand my lack of panic. “Are you going to keep it?” they asked, wide-eyed. As if the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s never happened. As if at least one-third of marriages don’t fail. As if everyone in my family and my boyfriend’s family, grandparents included, hadn’t broken their marriage vows. At least once. “What’s with all these people in our family having babies without getting married?” my middle-aged uncle (who is divorced and recently broke up with his live-in girlfriend) asked my 40-ish aunt (who recently divorced her husband because he’d taken up with a married woman, who is now his third wife; my aunt is now living with her boyfriend). The worst is from my parents. “Marriage is very important,” my mother said. “It establishes a bond that you just can’t get otherwise.” I wanted to argue with her, but she was getting ready to leave the country with her new husband. They spend their summers at their cottage up in Nova Scotia, a good 20-hour trip away from the rest of us. “Studies show that married couples are better off financially than single people,” my father’s youngish second wife insisted. It’s probably true that she is better off financially since marrying

⁸ “Living Together: Facts, Myths, About “Living in Sin”” (Ann Arbor, 2-4-00).

⁹ Murray Dubin, “A Mission to Remedy Marriage” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8-6-00).

my father, but I wasn't sure how that applied to me. When my boyfriend and I looked into getting married, we found out that we would pay an extra \$2,000 each year in taxes. If marriage is risky, doomed and expensive, well, why bother? "You just should," my father offered in that magnanimous, ain't-life-grand manner he developed shortly after re-entering the singles scene when I was a teenager. My father is big on the "shoulds" of life, with some reason. He has always done everything he was supposed to, even as a divorced father; he never even bad-mouthed my mom (nor did she ever trash him, for that matter). But the fact that my parents divorced well - - and they really did - - doesn't grant them immunity from their actions. The fact that my uncles and aunts and grandparents and family friends felt they had absolutely no choice other than to divorce doesn't change the outcome. They still got divorced, all of them. They still showed my generation, by example and by forcing us to go along with their example, that marriage was something easily and amicably exited from. Marriage, they said, was not that big of a deal. Premarital sex is fine. (Or at least that's what they implied when they presented their boyfriends and girlfriends at the breakfast table - - before we were even out of high school.) Families, they said, do not need to stay together if things become too boring. I would have more sympathy for divorced people if their lives had improved by getting out of terrible marriages that (apparently) couldn't be survived for another moment. But the ones I'm familiar with continue to associate with flawed human beings. These second and third marriages still seem to require work, and still have shortcomings. My mother and father, for example, still struggle with the same issues that plagued their marriage to each other. The only difference is, older and wiser, they both seem more willing to compromise, to sacrifice and to accept. I am not whining about or regretting the events of the last three decades. When my parents divorced in the late '70s, we children went along with it like troupers. When they started bringing home boyfriends and girlfriends in the '80s, we ultimately accepted these new people into our family. Sometimes, the new people went away. And we dealt with the divorces and separations all over again. And accepted the new people all over again. Fine. Exhausting, but fine. It's a wonder we 18- to 35-year-olds even have the energy to date. (And maybe some of us don't.) But for myself, the scattered, patchwork concept of family I grew up with has only increased my quest for commitment. I've seen firsthand the pain and futility of divorce culture and I don't intend to relive it, or to drag my children through the nightmare of watching their parents flirt with strangers. My decision not to marry does not indicate a desire for a life of debauchery and half-formed commitments. Quite the opposite ... but we have no fantasies about coasting through the next 50 years on the coattails of a weakened and disparaged contract that, thanks to boomer innovation, now includes options like pre-nup clauses. Considering everything we've seen, bearing the weight of our relationship on our own backs seems a hell of a lot wiser than leaning on the white-laced and satin-cummerbunded follies of our parents. Thanks, but we're looking for more than just a party, a round of toasts and a validity stamp from Uncle Sam to get us to that golden anniversary. Our parents, on the other hand, seem to believe in marriage more than they do in monogamy. Like I said, that's fine. Every generation has its torch to carry. But when this particular generation, which grooved to its own beat and stomped on every tradition that seemed too square, too inhibiting or just plain boring, turns around with nostalgia in its eyes and questions my choices, I have to protest. My generation would just as soon steer clear of the fatuous, feel-good mess of getting divorced and remarried. The tradition that was passed down to us - - in which divorce is a logical and expected conclusion to a marriage - - is one we would

just as soon pass by ... Of course marriage is on the decline. But don't blame us. The boomers started it."¹⁰

One could easily get depressed until we realize there is a common thread that runs through all the stories we have heard. It could be put in the form of a very simple question: "Where is God in all of this?" Marriage, after all, was His idea. He has a pattern. He has a plan. It can be different when we invite the Holy Trinity to honor our wedding and direct our marriage. Our expectations, hopes and dreams can and will be radically altered and transformed, and all for the better.

I want us to focus in particular on what begins a marriage: the wedding. This is what is described in Song of Solomon 3:6-11. It is a beautiful and fantastic scene. What are the distinctive characteristics and elements of the wedding God has planned for each one of us? God's word addresses 4 in this text.

I. A great wedding will be a public celebration. 3:6

A wedding should be one of the most exciting and important days in any person's life. God's plan is that you experience it only once until death parts us. It very legitimately should be a time of joy and laughter, happiness and hope. Solomon notes 2 particular facets which should accompany the public celebration.

1) A wedding is a time that should be special.

Marriages in the ancient Near East were civil rather than religious affairs. Most often they took place in a home. A central aspect of the wedding ceremony was a procession to the bride's home led by the groom. He would go and gather her unto himself, and then escort her back to their new home where the actual wedding ceremony would take place. The wedding feast would last sometimes up to a week. The marriage, however, would be consummated on the first night. It was a special ritual in which the man publicly pledged himself to his bride and she to him. Solomon and his entourage have come to Shulamith's home to get her. The pageantry and procession would honor Shulamith and appropriately sanctify the day in all of its significance. The wedding day is not just another day. It is a once in a lifetime event. It is indeed special.

¹⁰ Larissa Phillips, "The Case Against Matrimony" (*Salon.com*, 1999).

2) A wedding is a time to make a statement.

Solomon wants the world to know how much he loves this woman. As Shulamith comes out of the wilderness and into the city, columns of smoke appear to be her companion. We learn, however, it is actually myrrh and frankincense mingled with the fragrant powders of all the merchants. The burning of these spices would appeal both to the sense of sight and smell. These spices also would have been costly. This day would be the beginning of their new life together. Their commitment to each other is strong and secure. The celebration and even extravagance of the procession is appropriate for such an important occasion. They intend to make a statement.

Without being opulent and ostentatious, a wedding should be a celebration. It should be festive, but also spiritual. It should be a public testimony of the value we place on our mate, and the worth of their companionship. It is not God's plan that it take place quietly behind closed doors. It is a public affair!

II. A great wedding contains a promise of protection. 3:7-8

When Solomon came for Shulamith he did not come alone. He brought his companions. He brought his best. An escort of striking presence accompanied him. They enabled Solomon to make two statements about the marriage he and his bride would enjoy.

1) Marriage provides safety. 3:7

The 60 valiant or mighty men were friends of the groom. They were Solomon's closest and most trusted confidants. Most likely they were his royal bodyguard (cf. 2 Sam. 23:8-9), whose duty was to protect the king and his family. By their presence they served as a pledge of safety from Solomon to Shulamith. They are warriors of "Israel," of the nation.¹¹ They surround Solomon's couch (NIV "carriage"). She is safe under his protective care and concern. He will spare nothing to assure her heart and mind that she will be well taken care of.

¹¹ This is the only time "Israel" occurs in the Song. "Its presence is an indication that the poem dates prior to the death of Solomon in 931 B.C. (Carr, 110).

2) Marriage provides security. 3:8

The valiant warriors of Israel are experienced and skilled. Shulamith can put to rest any fears that might trouble her heart. They have their weapons and are experienced in the affairs of battle. Even at night when evil and wicked persons do their shameful deeds, she can be at peace that all is safe and secure. Her man will see to it. He will be her champion and defender.

This marriage is no shaky situation with nagging doubts and unanswered questions. Shulamith is not marrying some cad who will abuse her. She is marrying a real man who will love and protect her.

Tommy Nelson provides a really helpful word at this point in the context of the wedding ceremony. He writes, "Part of the safety and security of the wedding ceremony will be evident in the people who serve as your best man, maid or matron of honor, groomsmen, and bridesmaids. Choose godly people who will support you fully in the vows you make. As a whole, those who witness your marriage should be like a holy hedge of protection around you, keeping you focused toward each other inside the circle of matrimony, and keeping out anybody who might try to destroy your marriage. Don't ask someone to stand up for you who isn't completely committed to you, to your marriage, and in general, to the sanctity and value of marriage. Such a person will not encourage you to work through problems in your marriage. Such a person will not do the utmost to help you and your spouse when you need help. And they may embarrass you at rehearsal dinner!"¹²

III. A great wedding includes a pledge of commitment. 3:9-10

The missing word in cohabiting relationships is the "c" word: commitment. When a man and woman come together to say the "I do's," commitment envelopes each and every vow. There is a pledge of physical, spiritual, emotional and personal commitment. In particular two things are said.

1) All that I have belongs to you. 3:9-10

The carriage in which Solomon brought Shulamith to their wedding was fine! It was made of the very best materials money could buy. The wood was from Lebanon. The timbers from these forests were in great demand throughout the ancient Near East.¹³ It was from this wood that Solomon had carved his

¹² Nelson, 76.

¹³ Carr, 111.

palanquin or carriage. Added to this were pillars of silver; supports of gold and a seat of purple. All of this was exquisitely beautiful and expensive. It was Solomon's way of saying, "I will keep nothing back from you. All I have now belongs to you. You will always get my best."

Today, sometimes even in marriage, all that we have is not shared with our mate. In 1999, I was sad to learn, the best-selling book in Amazon.com's marriage category was *How to Write Your Own Premarital Agreement*. It is a book on prenuptial contracts. Said a publicist at Source books, where they hang the congratulatory plaque, "Kind of funny, isn't it? We put out all these books on love and marriage, and this is the bestseller."¹⁴ A wedding that honors God and our mate does not come with strings attached or things held back. If you are not confident your potential mate is worthy of all that belongs to you, perhaps you should reconsider your potential mate and why you are even considering marrying this person in the first place.

2) All my love belongs to you. 3:10

The interior of Solomon's carriage had an unusual interior. It was paved and inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. Some students of the Bible believe mosaics depicting love adorned the interior of the carriage. Duane Garrett suggests "inlaid with love" alludes to an association between "palanquin" and "bed" and is a subtle hint at the approaching wedding night."¹⁵ Whatever is true of the particular details the main point is clear: they loved each other, and they pledged that love to one another at their wedding.

Sometime back I came across an article that in a popular fashion contrasted "love" with "lust." If we would be honest, in the red, hot passions that lead to marriage, we are not always sure of or even in control of our mind, will and emotions. We have reached hormone heaven. Who needs to think at a time like this?! Answer: All of us. All of us need to weigh carefully what is going on and make sure what I have for this person is a lasting love and not a passing lust. Note the stark contrast which exists between the two. Give to each category strong consideration as it relates to your potential mate and partner for life.

IV. A wedding has the approval of others. 3:11

Sociologist Barbara Dafoe Whitehead has said, "Courtship is dying, lasting marriage is in crisis ... kiss marriage goodbye Today its hookup, breakup and get even. Is everybody happy?¹⁷ Newspaper Columnist, Suzanne Fields, says in today's world women are not winning but

¹⁴ Kathy Kristof, "Love and Marriage and Money" (*L.A. Times*, 9-14-00).

¹⁵ Garrett, 402.

¹⁷ *Manhattan Institutes City Journal*, Summer 1999.

losing, and losing big time. She directs our attention to the self-help section of our bookstores for a quick perusal of titles: *The Heartbreak Hardbook*; *Getting Over Him*; *How to Heal the Hurt by Hating*; *Dumped: A Survival Guide for the Woman Who's Been Left by the Man*; and my personal favorite: *The Woman's Book of Revenge: Getting Even When "Mr. Right" Turns Out to be All Wrong*.

You know, sometimes Mr. Right turns out to be Mr. Wrong. Cinderella turns out to be a Wicked Witch. Is there one last word of counsel that Solomon might give us to guide us away from such a disaster? Yes there is, and it is simply this: Make sure you have the approval and blessing of others.

1) Our friends will approve.

Notice "the daughters of Zion go forth" to join in the celebration of the wedding. They approve. They are enthused. In their mind this is a good and wonderful thing that is about to happen. They like Solomon when he is with Shulamith. She brings out the best in him, not the worst, when they are together. The same is true for Shulamith. She is a better and more beautiful woman when she is with Solomon. That is a good sign for us to always be on the lookout for.

2) Our family will approve.

Solomon's mother approved of Shulamith. The potential for in-law problems does not loom over the wedding, as is too often the case. She had prepared for him a crown similar to an Olympian laurel wreath, which symbolized the gladness and joy of his wedding day. According to Rabbinic tradition, crowns were worn by the bridegroom and the bride until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.¹⁸ This was a day of happiness not only for the king and his queen, but for all who shared in this wonderful event. Those who loved Solomon and Shulamith most were confident this marriage was meant to be and meant to last. Their approval is no guarantee, but it is an indication of the confidence both family and friends had in the rightness of this union. This is something every wise couple will carefully consider as they work to have a great wedding and a great marriage.

Conclusion

On April 13, 2000 a very unusual thing occurred on the campus of a Baptist Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Approximately 550 couples, hand in hand, and heart to heart, reaffirmed their marriage vows in a worship service and signed a covenant pledging to "exalt the sacred nature and permanence of the marriage covenant." The vows, penned by Dr. Paige Patterson and his wife, Dorothy, beautifully mirror the language of Ephesians 5:21-33, and are a wonderful expression of the covenantal commitment a husband and wife should pledge to each

¹⁸ Snaith, 57.

other on the day of their wedding. They also express the devotion and commitment that should characterize a marriage until death separates.

Husbands

My precious and honored wife, this day I renew before God my covenant with you. I covenant today, sacrificially to love you as Jesus loves His church. I covenant to bestow always upon you abundant honor. I will seek to know your needs and to provide for them materially, physically, mentally, and emotionally. I will seek your well-being, happiness and success above my own. Above all, I covenant to be the spiritual leader of our union, to provide a spiritual example through my walk with Christ, to teach the Bible, and to pray for my family, to lead family worship. I will be faithful to you physically, mentally, and emotionally and to avoid all that is pornographic, impure, or unholy. I will not be angry or bitter against you nor allow the sun to go down on my wrath. I will not keep books on evil. I will cultivate tender affection for you both in private and in public. I will compassionately give to you my body and spirit in the union which we alone enjoy together. I covenant this day to accept the role of servant leader. And to be to my children and grandchildren, should God grant, a compassionate, encouraging, and guiding father. This day, I seal this covenant for as long as we both shall live.

Wives

My precious and honored husband, this day I renew before God my covenant with you. I covenant this day to love and respect you with all the fervency of my being. I covenant to make our home a place of repose and comfort. I will honor you as the spiritual leader of our home. I will devote myself to you and the offspring God may give above all others. I will graciously submit to your servant leadership never allowing the sun to go down on my wrath. I will not keep books on evil. I will regard my responsibilities as wife and mother as priority above all else except God. I will seek your well-being, happiness, and success rather than my own. I will compassionately give to you my body and spirit in the union which we alone enjoy together. This day, I seal this covenant for as long as we both shall live.¹⁶

¹⁶ Melissa King, "Marriage Vows Renewed by the Pattersons and 1,100 Others at Southwestern Seminary (*Baptist Press*, 4-20-00).