



The Reception Question

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How much thought goes into our wedding receptions? I've been pondering that question for a number of years and now again as "wedding season" approaches. As a minister, I've had the honour of officiating at many weddings and most of the time being invited to the reception as well (but never to the Stag & Doe - I wonder why that is?).

It's obvious that a great deal of thought goes into the ceremony: many months in advance the location is booked, the minister is asked, the best man and maid of honour are selected, musicians are approached, a text is chosen, dresses are picked out and tuxedos are tried on. That one hour in the church is carefully choreographed to achieve the goal of a God-centred marriage of two of His children on their special day. But does the celebration which follows have the same goal? Do you leave the wedding reception with the same focus on the Lord's good gift of marriage and the wonder of His love in giving it as you had when leaving the service?

Good Humour?

There is an understandable change of mood from the ceremony to the reception. The nervousness has died down for the wedding party (and parents!). The solemnity of that occasion is behind and now it is time to relax and have fun. This is a good thing and fits with our calling to enjoy the good gifts God gives us (see the book of Ecclesiastes, e.g. chap. 11:7-10), but do we give thought to whether our fun and humour honour our Maker?

It's the *Herman* comics that first strike me, a staple in the programs at many of our receptions. Jim Unger knows how to make people laugh with his one-square snap-shots of life's humorous moments. They often reflect something of reality and we can laugh at ourselves in them, also a good thing. But when he sketches a marriage scene (the kind regularly chosen for the programs) then more often than not we find ourselves laughing at the very concept of marriage itself. His marriage spots consistently reflect a dysfunctional secular marriage and most certainly not a Christian marriage. Husbands and wives are pictured at odds, with one wanting to be apart from the other. The husband is often a blundering loafer trying to escape the marriage and the wife often an unhappy, complaining hag. Many segments make reference to multiple divorces and re-marriages.

Do we really want to send the message that marriage is the pits? It's hard for the comic reader not to be left feeling rather jaded about marriage and come to think of it as a very *laughable* institution. The contrast is stark: earlier in church we were taught to think of marriage as God's *blessing* but in our dinner programs we learn to think about it as a *curse*. This simply doesn't jibe.

Marriage Jokes

The unchristian humour is not only found in some program comics but also in what is presented live by some emcees and/or guests. It seems a regular feature for people to tell jokes which make fun of the God-given roles of wives or husbands or simply of marriage itself. Here's a couple of examples: "*It is said that husband is the head of the family – but remember that the wife is the neck!*" Or: "*Wife: why have you been reading our marriage certificate for an hour? Husband: I was just looking for the expiry date!*"

When I hear punch lines like these I can't help but think of the many struggling marriages (also within the church!) in which such sentiments are no joke. A number of our Christian marriages are under strain precisely because husband and wife either do not understand their God-given roles or refuse to obey the Lord's calling in this respect. Such jokes are no help to them and may even hurt them deeply.

I'm certain that no one intends this result, but the reality is that such jokes put down and demean the biblical roles of wife as submissive helper and husband as godly head and Christ-like leader. That kind of humour makes out like those who think and act this way are weird, strange and abnormal. It unwittingly encourages us to follow the approach of the world. We know the world is attacking marriage. Our own country is a leader in promoting gay marriage. Feminism and secularism have combined to make submission and headship dirty words. Unbelievers scoff at the notion of the wife "obeying" her husband as 1 Peter 3:6 teaches. Let's not follow their pattern or give it credibility with our jokes. Rather, let's use clean and intelligent humour which serves to retain and even promote the honour of God's good gift of marriage.

Toast & Roast

One good development that I've noticed is the decrease of toast speeches which humiliate either the bride or groom. It used to be quite expected that the bridal couple would get verbally "roasted" by those conducting the toasts. There is a fine line between gently ribbing someone on account of their quirks, foibles or peculiar habits and on the other hand exposing them to great shame and embarrassment with sordid tales of the past. The former is good humour; the latter is poor judgment. The one maintains a love and respect for the neighbour while the other hurts and is nasty. Also in our making fun (and let's include the games and skits which are often part of our entertainment) we need to remember the Lord's commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves and to do to them what we would have others do to ourselves. Ask yourself: how would I feel if this was being said of me (or done to me) at my wedding?

To the Couple!

Another question worth asking when we write a toast to the bride or groom is: do we design it with God in mind? Of course, the purpose of the speech is to honour the bride or groom, usually a close friend of the toast-maker and this has its place. Many times the speech focuses on funny things about the bride's past, or about how good a friend the groom has been and how important this person has been in the toast-maker's life. Because of the close bond between the friends, it can even be quite emotional, especially for the ladies. But most-often God is not mentioned until the very end, with a brief, "And I wish you the Lord's blessing in your married life." Such a wish is good but could we not do more with the speech to honour the Lord?

That friend is someone we love and who loves us. That friend is important to us and has been a help to us (and hopefully we to him or her) and who put this friend in our life? The Lord! Who made this friend the special person he or she is? Who arranged the circumstances of our life in such a way that we could meet and become friends with this individual? It would be good to publicly thank God for His gift and providential leading. This friend has meant so much to us and we want to share that with the guests to show respect – great! Let us do it in the style of the Holy Spirit who regularly highlights the good works of men all the while thanking God for what these brothers and sisters have done (see Philippians 1 or 1 Thessalonians 1). Commend the friend, credit the Lord.

The Lord's Children

One of the noticeable changes in our wedding celebrations over the last 15 years is the increased use of pictures and videos. Our digital age has made these things rather inexpensive and the technology is becoming quite sophisticated. At the reception, it is quite common to have a 7-10 minute video of both the bride and groom in their growing-up years. This is often cute and touching but I think we can do much more with this. I would like to challenge our budding video artists and power-point experts to consciously bring the Lord "into the picture."

What I mean is this: the bride and groom are not just two human beings in a sea of humanity - they are two of God's own children! For those baptized as infants, all their life they have been the object of God's covenant love and providential care. The Lord has been busy providing for their needs - giving them Christian parents and friends and allowing them (in many cases) a Christian education. It is by the Lord's guiding and gifting that the bride and groom are who they are. Could the video not be set within that framework? Instead of just a presentation of loosely connected scenes in a person's life where the focus is entirely on the person, the story could be told of how the Lord through the years shaped and molded His son and daughter to be the special people they are today. In this too the spot-light would still shine on the bridal couple but in such a way that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are praised for all the good that is found in them.

Sparkling Wine

There is one last point which should give us the most pause for reflection for it is often the most jarring when compared to the piety of the ceremony. Do we at our marriage feasts handle the gift of alcohol in a God-fearing way? Many wedding receptions feature a bar – an open bar, a cash bar, a ticketed bar or some combination thereof. Sometimes it is used to raise money for the bridal couple. And it is always well-used. In fact, the problem is that it is too well-used by some of the guests! The pull toward it is strong, the line-ups are long and the effects are obvious – manufactured giddiness, embarrassing silliness and outright obnoxiousness as people move from tipsy to drunk. And then sometimes only twelve hours later (or less!) we sit piously together Sunday morning in church and even join each other at times around the Lord's Table too as if nothing happened. This, too, does not jibe with being a child of God.

Think of what it does to the reputation of God when His people party like the world. In fact, many times there are non-Christians or non-church members in attendance at our receptions – what must they think of us Christians? Of the church? Of Jesus Christ? The Lord does not condemn the drinking of wine or beer or other forms of alcohol but He does condemn drunkenness (Eph 5:18). Can we not think of ways to have fun – genuine amusement – that does

not abuse alcohol and offend the Lord? Perhaps thought can be given to limiting alcohol to table wine or reducing the availability of alcoholic beverages or even going altogether without it. The Lord allows its moderate use but it's not like the Lord commands us to drink it! It is not a must. We are to be wary of what sparkles in the cup and goes down so smoothly (Proverbs 23:29-35). If there is temptation for some toward drunkenness, would it not be better to help keep our brothers and sisters from falling into sin by serving punch or pop or juices instead? Without a doubt Christian weddings are causes for rejoicing and celebration! By all means, let's thoroughly enjoy them as gifts from our God and Redeemer! The Bible teaches us that our parties and celebrations are fully under the Lordship of Christ Jesus. There is a way to have good fun which fully honours His Lordship. Let's take up the challenge and make our wedding receptions all they can be!

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