

Worship the Lord

No.78, May 2016



Weddings

By James Huebner

God does not prescribe the forms of full-time representative ministry, but the most common and most all-encompassing form in our circles is the parish pastor. What are the responsibilities of the typical pastor? "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction ... do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tm 4:2,5). A pastor is to use the Holy Scriptures "for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tm 3:16), and "to equip God's people for works of service" (Eph 4:12), and much, much more.

Some days the pastor is primarily the presider and preacher. Some days he is primarily a teacher or consoler of souls or equipper of saints or rebuker of the impenitent. Some days he is primarily an administrator. But one ministry situation requires all possible pastoral roles at the same time: weddings. Yes, he is the presider and preacher during a wedding and in that setting also doing the work of an evangelist. But wedding *preparation* calls for all of his pastoral and professional gifts and skills.

Wedding preparation calls for all of his pastoral and professional gifts and skills.

Some couples are prospects, or one is a member and the future spouse is not, and the "evangelist hat" is on during Bible Information Class. All too often couples are cohabitating before marriage, requiring the "rebuker hat" and "patient-loving-instructor hat." Pre-marriage instruction time involves his "teacher hat."

But when emotions are running high in anticipation of the big day, "The day I've dreamed of since I was a little girl," and bride-zilla has a chorus of strong-willed cheerleaders from her mother to her bridesmaids to back her up, every ounce of pastoral care and tact is needed to hang on to the mast of a Christ-centered wedding amid the wind and waves of the wedding preparation storm.

Every ounce of pastoral care and tact is needed to hang on to the mast of a Christ-centered wedding amid the wind and waves of the wedding preparation storm.

Whether you have only one wedding each year or whether half your Saturdays are filled with weddings, the pastor will have a wedding planning meeting with each couple. The goals include getting better acquainted and planning the particulars of date,



Pastor Huebner has served at Grace, Milwaukee since 1982 and has presided at nearly 300 weddings. He was elected First Vice-President of WELS in 2009 and continues to serve in that position.

Continued on next page

time of service, size of the wedding party, little kids or not, facilities-use guidelines—and especially making sure the worship is Christ-centered. And that, dear brothers, is the key.

For that reason—that is, to keep Jesus at the center of wedding worship—we ask couples, who giddily announce their engagement, for three things: a date for the wedding, attendance at the pre-marriage seminar (and non-members to give serious consideration to the Bible Information Class), and a *Wedding Checklist* meeting. It's that last one where all pastoral and professional skills come to bear, and it's the tone of the pastor, his listening ear, his caring heart, his winsome smile, and his patience that make all the difference.

Compiling a list of items for the *Wedding Checklist* meeting is not brain surgery. After hearing the couple's "story" and getting better acquainted (if both are not life-long members or if the pastor is rather new to the congregation), the *Wedding Checklist* includes:

- Name, address, phone numbers, email. The pastor is able to address a live-together situation or offer congratulations for going God's way and not living together.
- Date and time of the service. Offer advice about a lengthy lag between worship and the evening meal—no mandates but simply consideration for out-of-town guests who will wonder what to do for three hours between service and reception and for aging relatives whose evening meals are earlier than 7:45pm...after the father of the bride, the bridesmaids, and groomsmen have delivered their TMI speeches.
- Photographer. I am only interested in whether the pictures are before or after the service (or both) since that helps guide advice about the time schedule for the day. The couple does not need to hear cautions about the photographer disrupting worship by wandering down the aisles and peeking out between the groomsmen to get a good angle of the bridesmaids. That conversation is directly with the photographer on the day.
- The service (see below).
- Printed worship folder. While *Christian Worship* provides the order of worship, printing the "Call to Worship" and prayers with the rest of the service in outline fashion helps non-churched guests follow along. This part of the conversation can deal with a couple's inquiry about writing their own vows. I also state that they may print their own folders, but I ask them to use our template. I mention that if they desire and purchase special paper, we will print the service folder for free.
- Number of attendants.
- Number of ushers.
- Children. The three-year-old niece may be cuter than a button in her little dress while tossing silk flower petals, and the five-year-old nephew may be handsome in his mini-tux carrying a pillow with a (fake) ring attached. But because of humorous or disruptive experiences, I suggest that any child eight or younger

can walk in before the bride but will need both a "starter" and a "target" to sit with during the service.

- Procession. The *Wedding Checklist* describes two options for bridesmaids: 1) walk in alone, or 2) walk in escorted by groomsmen. I note the couple's decision so that the rehearsal goes smoother with such predetermined decisions not debated during the rehearsal.
- Facilities use guidelines. By expressing concern about Aunt Matilda slipping from her walker on rice that has been thrown and concern for the bride getting birdseed in her hair or eye, the pastor can share guidelines which include no throwing of rice or birdseed and no moving of chancel furniture.
- License. Share the latest state regulations regarding how and when to acquire a marriage license.

The heart of the *Wedding Checklist* meeting revolves around the service. I begin with a brief overview of the purpose of worship—to proclaim the saving love of the Lord Jesus—which occurs best in a vertical dialogue as God comes to us through his holy Word, and we respond to him in prayer and praise. (By praise I mean congregational participation that proclaims the truths of God's saving love). I then make it clear that everything we do in wedding worship from start to finish is designed to be vertical, God to us and us to God. The message goes like this:

While you wouldn't be getting married if you didn't love each other [chuckling while saying that], that relationship is horizontal and is highlighted at the reception. So, the other expressions of love between you (the couple) and parents and family members, like handing out roses to parents, are best saved for the reception because you want wedding worship to offer to your family and guests a testimony of how much the Lord Jesus means to you...which is exactly what happens in Christ-centered, vertical worship.

Everything we do in wedding worship from start to finish is designed to be vertical, God to us and us to God.

I then share the service outline: call to worship, lessons, sermon, marriage rite, prayers, and blessing. Then I say:

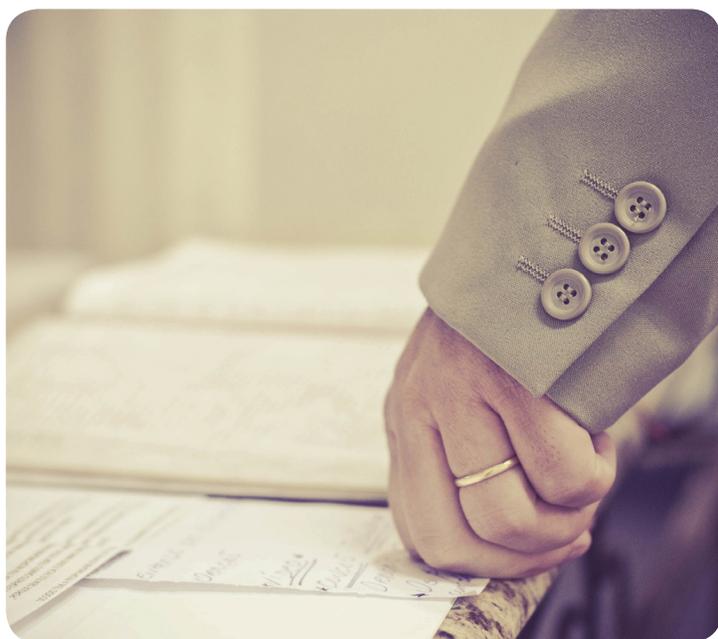
We typically insert two hymns into the order of worship, and we encourage people to use hymns instead of solo singing. Many weddings tend to be passive experiences: the guy up front does all the talking, a woman in the balcony sings a solo, and all the people do is check their watches for the reception start time. By using the *Christian Worship* order and hymn singing, people get to participate in the call to worship, hymns, and prayers. Many guests, even non-Lutheran guests, have commented afterward, "That was different. We worshiped!" So, we'll assign a musician to your day. That

person will plan amazing Christ-centered music for walking in (processional), hymns, and walking out (recessional). If you would like to give input, you can contact that musician who will even meet with you and play some samples so you can join in choosing the processional, hymns, and recessional. [At this point I sometimes digress into a description of how planning Christ-centered worship can be done under a unified theme: e.g. the Schübler chorale by J.S. Bach, *Wachet auf* as the processional with the congregation singing CW 455 as the first hymn; or CW 237 after the marriage rite with Paul Manz's *God of Grace and God of Glory* as the recessional; and I let the couple listen to a portion of the music from my laptop.] Some hymns are known beyond Lutheran churches and capture both the good news about Jesus and also your praise and thanks to God. Keep in mind that it is good form to remember the musician(s) with an honorarium (that's a money gift), and at our congregation the typical rate for an organist for a wedding is \$ ____.

Many guests, even non-Lutheran guests, have commented afterward, "That was different. We worshiped!"

At this point, the couple may have other questions. If they don't bring them up, neither do I. But just in case:

- "Can my college roommate play violin?" This is a wonderful opportunity to avoid the simple "No! That's against WELS rules" and to share the biblical doctrine of church fellowship, something like this: "May I ask where your roommate regularly attends worship?" And after the response: "I'm sure your roommate would be honored, and it would mean a lot to you for her to participate. But the Holy Scriptures lead to the



conviction that participation in worship in such a role is an expression of oneness and unity with what we believe, teach, and confess, and you would hate to put your roommate in a position to indicate that she agrees with us when she hasn't had time to check it out or has beliefs similar but not in complete agreement with ours. A great way to involve her would be to ask her to play a piece right after the dinner speeches at the reception."

- "Can we have a unity candle?" Response: "Yes. But keep in mind, that only about 10% of weddings at our church have a unity candle. You are not required to have one. There is no historic Lutheran worship precedent for unity candles. Some feel that it's a nice custom, so you can certainly have one. My concern is that it functions properly; I have seen the bride and groom light the center candle from their two, walk away, and then it goes out, bringing a wave of giggles. So, you can have one, but since there is no room in the chancel for a unity candle because of the chancel furniture and the wedding party, we position it on a pedestal in front of the first pew. When the service concludes with the blessing, you simply turn to each other, step down to the candle, light it, and then continue down the aisle. That way you won't have to worry about negotiating the steps again in your long gown and wait for the maid of honor to straighten it again."
- "Can we have an aisle runner?" Response: "Sure! But we don't have one. You'll have to rent or buy one from the florist. By the way, do you know how that custom got started? It began in the days when streets were dirt or gravel. An aisle runner kept bridesmaids' and bride's dresses clean. Since our streets and sidewalks are paved, you're not required to have a runner."
- "Can I kiss the bride after the blessing?" Response: "Why are you asking?" After their response: "Nothing in Scripture prevents that. But keep in mind that your kiss is an expression of the horizontal love between the two of you which will be highlighted at the reception. So, sure. Go ahead. But consider whether that will disrupt the flow of thought and the Christ-centered vertical message you have generated throughout the service."
- "Should my mother stand when I begin walking down the aisle?" Response: "Wedding services in some places tend to be bride-and-groom-centered instead of Christ-centered. That's why I'm not a big fan of the mother standing to cue everyone. But whether she does or not will be a moot point. All your friends from work, sitting in the back, will stand before she does."

Some additional matters to keep the focus on Christ and to honor the order in *Christian Worship*:

- Gone is the question to the bride's father standing in the aisle: "Who gives this woman...?" He just walked her down the aisle. We know—and the worship folder indicates—who he is.
- Gone is the announcement after the blessing as the couple turns to face the congregation, "I now introduce to you Mr.

and Mrs. _____” ...as if someone in the fourth pew will say, “Oh, that’s who that is. I’m at the wrong wedding.” And if anything will break the mood of Christ-centered worship, it’s an announcement guaranteed to bring a roar.

One final important part of the *Wedding Checklist* meeting: the rehearsal. Brides and grooms are bombarded by the wedding industry and by what they see in media with images that detract from Christ-centered worship and fix the focus on the bride (and sometimes the groom, too). They expect careful scripting of every movement of their hands and feet from procession to position at the chancel. The pastor who makes a big deal of the rehearsal—who allows for the bridesmaids and mothers to debate and dictate how the wedding party walks in and where they stand, who spends excessive time assuring proper spacing between couples (or bridesmaids) walking in, who needs the musician present to play the full processional twice (or more) for extra procession practice, who puts dimes on the floor where bridesmaids and groomsmen are to stand, who speaks through the entire service including practicing the exchange of vows at least once if not twice, and who scripts the exact timing for the bride to hand flowers to the maid of honor and the best man to hand rings to the groom—is playing right in a bride-centered culture.

Several years ago we moved wedding rehearsals to an hour and a half before the wedding. I introduce the concept at the *Wedding Checklist* meeting this way:

I hope you’re planning for a rehearsal dinner or groom’s dinner the night before. You are? Wonderful! That’s an excellent way for your wedding party and their significant others to get acquainted and to meet your parents. What a special night! But here’s the good news. You won’t have to arrange your time together that evening around a rehearsal. We do the rehearsal on the day of the wedding. Don’t worry! There’s really no need for it the night before since it only takes five minutes. I simply line couples (or bridesmaids if unescorted) in the aisle so they can see the order, tell them how much space to leave before following the couple ahead, and show them where to stand at the chancel step. They don’t practice walking all the way in but move up-tempo from their aisle line-up position to the chancel. Then I tell the groom where to stand. That’s it. Beyond reminding them to be comfortable by shifting their weight and describing how to meet their escort for the recessional, they do not need to know any more or practice.

Several years ago we moved wedding rehearsals to an hour and a half before the wedding.

This generates a common question: “What about not seeing the bride before the wedding?” Response: “We don’t need the bride for the rehearsal.” Then speaking to the bride: “That’s because your job is the easiest. You walk in with Dad and stand by the groom.” Most brides (and grooms, too) are relieved and thrilled. For the nervous-Nellie bride I say, “If you absolutely have to walk through the details, I’ll meet with you and your fiancé after worship the Sunday before the wedding and explain it all.”

Some future brides and even some pastors might wonder, “How will we know the timing of the processional?” Response: “If the wedding party is large and the musician has come to the end of the processional, the musician will repeat some of it. If the wedding party is small and the musician has not completed the piece, we’ll stand in the chancel and wait. We’re not in a hurry.”

For skeptics who are thinking, “I do two weddings a year. I can’t convince families to have the rehearsal on the day of the wedding.” Fine! But my encouragement is the same for a night-before rehearsal. Don’t let it play into the bride-centered culture and mindset. Keep the rehearsal at 5-10 minutes, and keep the focus on Jesus.

How many times have you heard a brother pastor say, “I’ll take ten funerals over one wedding”? I imagine one reason is that people at a funeral are more focused on the message, and wedding guests tend to be more focused on the party (reception). Why not take another look at how to work with couples and wedding preparation? See this as an excellent opportunity to put all your pastoral and professional skills in motion for one main objective—to proclaim the saving message of our crucified and risen Lord and to keep that the center of every wedding. God bless your service to his people!

