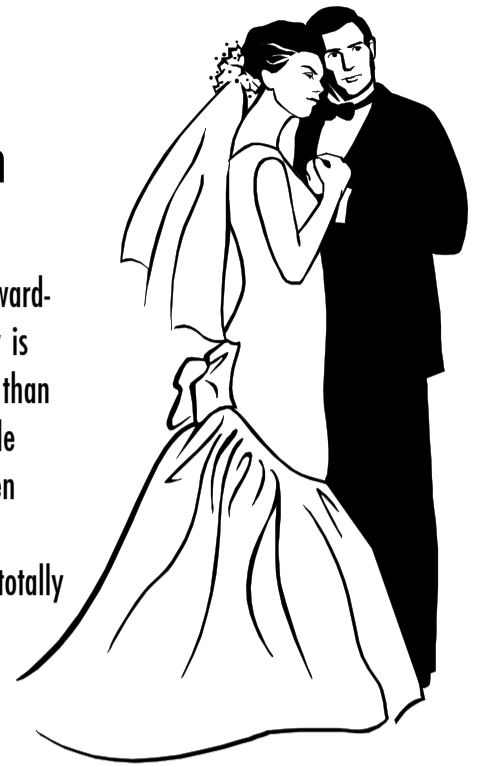


# WEDDING POLICY

## Christopher Gudmundsson



Some of the highest joy and deepest grief of a pastor's ministry revolve around marriage. There are few experiences so moving, so rewarding, so sweet to a pastor's soul as conducting a service uniting two committed Christians to one another in holy matrimony. And matrimony is indeed holy, created by God as the first and most important structure in all of human society. (Genesis 3:18-25) It is more important even than parenthood; only in marriage does God expect a "one-flesh" intimacy. When the pastor has taken the time to assure himself that the couple understand the holiness of marriage, and are sold to the task of building a holy family God's way, joining them to one another is a keen delight.

On the other hand, performing a wedding without such assurance would be a staggering burden. Many professed believers are almost totally unaware of the Bible's teaching on marriage and family. That's one reason in America, people who call themselves Bible-believing Christians abuse, cheat on, and divorce each other almost as often as the rest of the population. Few activities in ministry are any more taxing than trying to help a husband and wife who have allowed their marriage to begin to fall apart through worldly, unbiblical thinking and living. Few griefs are more acute than watching them finally turn away from each other.

The greatest practical tool Christians have for showing people the truth and preciousness of Jesus is a biblically sound family. On the other hand, one of the greatest barriers to the gospel is Christians whose families are indistinguishable from the world's. For these reasons and many others, a carefully thought-through policy on weddings is a must for every pastor who wants to deal responsibly with people's souls. What follows is mine.

### WHY I PERFORM WEDDINGS AT ALL

To most folks, the answer to that would be obvious: that's one of the things preachers do. However, the Bible never even hints that pastors should be involved in marrying people. So how did we get in this business?

The original Christian churches and preachers never performed weddings, so far as we can tell from the Bible. Like all the believers of previous ages, they simply accepted the customs of the societies in which they found themselves. They knew that marriage was a public covenant, so they simply did whatever the rest of the public did to recognize or solemnize that commitment.

The next generations made the understandable but deadly mistake of cooperating with the Roman emperors in the fourth century after Christ's birth, as they made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. The Christian faith became the law of the land, as it never should have. By the time of the Protestant Reformation over a millennium later, the organized state Church and regulated every aspect of life for the populace. According to the Roman teaching, marriage was a sacrament, an effectual means of grace. Only the Church could create a marriage, and so only one of her priests could perform a wedding that would be recognized by the government.

Protestants, including Baptists, carried over the habit of expecting clergy to perform weddings. But for Baptists, there was no good reason to do so. We have never believed in sacraments of any sort. There is no biblical or doctrinal reason whatsoever for pastors or churches to be involved in performing weddings. If we are to continue in the practice, we must either do so out of meaningless tradition, or form a new tradition, based solely on a solidly biblical foundation. Here is my attempt to do just that.

### SOME FOUNDATIONAL WEDDING THINKING

Whatever the historical reasons, our society has given to ordained ministers the legal power to join two people in marriage. That is a power not to be taken lightly. Paul reminded Timothy that he would answer to God for how carefully or how recklessly he exercised his power to officially ordain new pastors. (1 Timothy 5:17-22) Similarly, I expect to answer to the Almighty for how I use my legal authority to create new marriages. After all, the offices of husband and wife are every bit as important to the family as the office of pastor is to the church, for all the reasons outlined above. And to God, the Christian family matters -- far more than perhaps we know.

In our culture, steeped as it is in all the old social forms of our European past, people often want to be wed by a minister. If you asked them why, they would most likely give one of four answers: a) out of pure tradition, b) because church buildings are normally pretty places, c) because no justice of the peace is available, or d) for some sense of divine presence or blessing in the service. The first two reasons are not anything to which I would bother to respond. The third is more substantial. If two people want to get married, but cannot be married anywhere in town unless I do the service, common decency would call on me to do it unless some compelling consideration prevented me.

The fourth motive is the most worthy. People really should want God's blessing in their lives. Yet for just that reason, it is also the most dangerous. For non-Christians or nominal Christians, a church wedding can be a tragically self-deceptive exercise in mere wishful thinking. A minister's presence at a wedding cannot bestow God's blessing on a marriage; neither can the wedding's taking place in a "religious" building. The only thing that can bring God's presence and blessing into a marriage is for both groom and bride to be committed Christians who understand God's plan for marriage, and who will follow it.

Having what is commonly called "a Christian wedding" has only one real and lasting value: as a testimony to the world of the couple's commitment to build a Christian family according to the teachings of God's Word. As such, it can be a powerful, convicting, inspiring witness to God's holiness and grace. It can have a unique ability to confront worldliness and confirm holiness. As a general rule, that is the only kind of wedding I am willing to perform -- a genuinely Christian one.

### MY WEDDING POLICIES

With all that groundwork laid, here are my policies:

I will perform secular weddings as a service for couples who are morally qualified to marry if there is no justice of the peace readily available. Couples are "morally qualified to marry" if they are adults, are not pursuing a commitment to someone of the same gender, are not already married, and are not sexually active with or living under the same roof with the person they're planning to marry.

I will perform a Christian wedding only for a couple who confess genuine repentance toward God and true faith in Jesus Christ, and who are faithful members of a church. The need to be practicing Christians before they can meaningfully have a Christian wedding. This seems self-evident to me.

I cannot perform a Christian wedding where only one of the couple confesses Christ as Lord and Savior. For a believer to yoke himself in any binding relationship with an unbeliever is a clear violation of Scripture (2 Corinthians 6:14). And marriage is the most binding relationship any two people can enter.

For those desiring a Christian wedding, I will almost always require a four-month preparation period. This policy springs from a desire to be uniform in educating couples about the

Bible's teaching on marriage. Many professed Christians are unaware of what God has said. Many more do not understand very much of what they know, or practice very much of what they understand. Those four months will break down as follows.

- ◆ When the couple ask me to marry them, I will thank them for the request. I will give them some material that is designed to help Christians discern biblically if they should even be considering marriage. I will ask them to read through it together, and interact with the questions it asks.
- ◆ Soon after, if they wish, I will meet with them to talk about the booklet. If I believe they have understood the biblical instruction it contains and committed themselves to building a biblical marriage, if they are morally qualified to marry, and if they still desire my services, we will set a tentative date for the wedding. At that point, they will have my firm commitment to perform the ceremony. Only under the most extreme circumstances will I fail to keep that commitment.
- ◆ We will spend several weeks, in weekly sessions lasting about an hour, studying the biblical teaching on marriage & family. The couple will covenant with me to do homework to prepare for each session. I will covenant with them to pray for them daily, to hold what they tell me in biblical confidence, and to be available to them whenever they need me.
- ◆ Since last-minute wedding arrangements become all-consuming, I expect these sessions to be finished three or four weeks prior to the wedding date.
- ◆ I will charge no fee for premarital counseling, or for performing the ceremony.

## REMARRIAGE AFTER A DIVORCE

Divorce, the experts tell us, is more traumatic even than the death of a spouse. I believe it. So I dread to think that I might seem insensitive to the frightful levels of emotional pain that many divorced people have been through. I want every one of them to find in the cross of Jesus all the healing and forgiveness they need.

Still, the Bible's teaching on divorce is quite explicit: divorce should be avoided at all costs, and remarriage after divorce is normally an act of adultery. (The passages touching divorce are Gen 2:18-25; Deu 24:1-4; Mal 2: 13-16; Mat 5:31-32, 19:3-12; Mar 10:2-12; Luk 16:18; Rom 7:2-3; 1Co 7:10-16, 39.) Like most Christians in this country, I have tried to resist the force of what the Bible says. I long held the opinion, common among American Christians, that remarriage is permissible if the divorce was for adultery or abandonment. Yet, having studied the issue long and searchingly, I am forced finally to submit to what Jesus himself says: remarriage after divorce is an act of adultery in the eyes of God. For that reason, I will not usually be willing to perform a wedding for someone who has been divorced.

I am aware that there is a wide diversity of opinion about the proper interpretation of the various texts, and that there are many devout and sincere believers who disagree with my position. I do not expect anyone to conform to my thinking unless they are convinced by the Scripture. By the same token, I ask not to be expected to conform to anyone else's thinking unless the Bible shows me different.

I do not believe that Jesus or Paul ever intended to suggest that remarriage after a divorce is morally permissible. In Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9, Jesus was addressing a specific custom of his people: betrothal. He was teaching that divorce during betrothal (prior to actual marriage) was permissible if one party was found to have become sexually active during the betrothal. That is why he named the offense "sexual immorality," not "adultery" (see also Matthew 15:19, where Matthew lists the two as distinct from each other). This point would be especially important for Jesus to make, since his own earthly father Joseph seriously considered divorcing Mary during their betrothal. Why? Because she was pregnant, which he naturally assumed meant that she had been sexually immoral. It took a visit from an angel to convince Joseph that she had not. (Matthew 1:18-25) The fact that the exception clause applies only to betrothal explains why Mark and Luke felt no need to report it: they were writing to Gentiles like us, among whom Jewish betrothal customs would have mattered very little. Regardless of the betrothal question, though, the two passages still prohibit almost all remarriages.

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, Paul says something about abandonment, but nowhere says that the abandoned spouse is free to remarry. Rather, he is permitting a Christian who is being deserted by a pagan spouse simply to let that spouse go, without feeling obligated to try to force a reconciliation. "We are called to peace," Paul says.

In sum, I will almost never marry a divorced person because I believe the Bible teaches that remarriage after divorce is an act of adultery. That is not to say that I believe a divorced and remarried person is living in a constant state of adultery; that half-baked idea is totally unbiblical. Rather, the act of remarriage, when the spouse is still living, is an act of adultery, and is wrong. Nor is it to say that divorce is an unforgivable sin; where there is true repentance, there is always forgiveness and healing. Nor is it to say that a remarriage after divorce "doesn't count"; it does indeed, and God will expect the new couple to make it last until death. Nor is it to say that divorced and remarried persons are less than wanted where I minister; people with all kinds of problems (people like me) are welcome. Nor is it to say that remarriage after divorce ends a man's usefulness as an ordained leader in a church. It limits his usefulness for a while, to be sure, because it is sin. But over the long term, only an arrogant and unrepentant heart can make a man unusable. We have divorced and remarried men serving as deacons in our church, and that is not in any way a compromise with the world. It is simply a testament to the reality and power of God's grace.

Still, I believe that, for a divorced person, the act of remarriage is normally an adulterous act. In love, I normally will not help folks commit it. There are some exceptions to this, but I feel like I'm taking a risking sin whenever I make one. That's why it happens so seldom. Yet I'm more than willing to discuss the issue with couples, if they're willing to have that talk.

Do I really love divorced people? God thinks I do: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." (1 John 5:2)

## CONCLUSION

I recognize that some people will find these policies difficult, and will want to know why I think I'm right to maintain them. My answer is that no pastor is under any obligation to marry anyone to start with. First of all, no Christian is required by God to marry at all; in fact the Scripture says that sometimes -- and in some ways -- it's better to stay single if you can. (1 Corinthians 7:1-9) Second, no Christian is expected by God to get married in a church or by a preacher; the Scripture certainly contains no such instruction. Third, although some folks seem to think the preacher's main jobs are marrying and burying, the Bible has set my priorities for me quite differently. I am to commune with God, and I am to know and teach his Word. (Acts 6:1-4) Still, I am deeply honored to be asked to perform any funeral, and really do like weddings. But I am never commanded by God to marry anyone. When I do perform a wedding, I will do so because I am convinced that it will well serve the Kingdom of God.

Church members for whom this policy is "just a little too much" will not offend me at all if they find another minister to wed them. I'll just politely disagree, and go on fervently loving them. Ultimately, each person will give his Lord a complete account of the offenses he has taken, just as I will give an account of the offenses I have given. On that awe-filled Day, public opinion will count for precisely nothing. God's will, discovered and done in this life by rightly learning and humbly living the Word in all of life, will be all that matters. Southern Baptists taught me when I was a child to "stand alone on the Word of God." I'm still grateful for that advice, and plan to follow it as best I can.