

# DISCUSSION PAPER

## Review of RFI's approach to pre-marriage counsel and wedding service format

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From the fellowship of the presbytery

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### Background

In recent months, the Lord has been urging us to turn in repentance from our sacramental approach to pre-marriage counsel and wedding services.

We recognise that many people may have mistakenly believed that 'the church' marries a couple. Where this understanding has prevailed, the marriage celebrant has been viewed as the minister of God's blessing to the couple through the administration of a 'seven blessings' wedding service.

The scriptural symbolism associated with the seven blessings service has promoted a sacramental approach to the conduct of wedding services, which has also influenced the pre-marriage counsel given to courting couples. In the absence of illumination, sacramentalism through blessing can become an alternative to the establishment of a couple's house according to God's covenant purpose for marriage.

This highlights the need for a clear statement regarding the process of preparation for Christian marriage, and the format of our wedding services. Such a statement should provide clarity to all concerned regarding the accountabilities that belong to the elders of the church; to the families of the couple; and to the couple themselves as they seek marriage according to the order that has been established by God.

### The laws of the land

The law in Australia defines marriage as being the union of two people, voluntarily entered into for life. It is important to note that, while this definition has been deliberately altered in recent years to allow for same sex unions, the law recognises the right of Christian churches and ministers to uphold the biblical understanding of marriage as being between a man and a woman.

Currently, Restoration Fellowships International (RFI) is recognised by the government as an organisation with the authority to nominate marriage celebrants who can solemnise marriages

according to law. In accordance with this designation, we are obliged to comply with the requirements of the law as we support couples in their desire to enter Christian marriage, including offering pre-marriage counselling.

Those who offer Christian counsel to courting couples are commended to this care by the presbytery. While the presbytery's function in relation to courtship counsel and marriage does not derive its definition from governing authorities, it is made up of men who are RFI marriage celebrants and/or recognised as ministers of entities affiliated with RFI.

A couple is legally joined in marriage through the service conducted by RFI marriage celebrants. However, it is essential to remember that a Christian couple effectively marry themselves by making covenant with each other before the Lord and His people.

### The nature of pre-marriage counsel

During courtship, a couple may seek support from the church to establish the foundations of a genuinely Christian marriage. In this instance, the role of a Christian leader (including a marriage celebrant) is to minister the gospel of sonship, proclaiming God's covenant purpose for marriage to the couple. This ministry includes providing counsel to the couple as they process the culture of their relationship towards the establishment of a Christian house in Christ. Leaders, nominated by the presbytery, offer this counsel to the couple as a fellowship rather than as a service.

The input provided by counsellors will be based on the biblical understanding of Christian marriage. Fundamental to this understanding is the knowledge of how to court in 'sanctification and honour'. 1Th 4:3-8.

Sanctification and honour are hallmarks of *fellowship*. Fellowship in the body of Christ should be the setting for Christian disciples to meet and relate with one another. Within this context, which is established by the proceeding word of God, they are able to initiate relationships that

reflect the culture of *friendship* that was espoused by Jesus. He taught, 'Greater love has no-one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.' Joh 15:13-14. When founded in this culture, friendships that become *exclusive* are able to progress to courtships that are distinguished by sanctification and honour.

A relationship that is initiated on any basis other than fellowship in Christ will be *carnal*. Such a relationship will merely service a person's desire for identity verification through projection. By this, we mean that the image that they have of themselves is informed and affirmed through the relationships that they pursue, and by how they are received by others. They are unable to truly worth, or even to perceive another, because they see them only through the veil of their own projection.

The motive for initiating a courtship must not be identity verification or projection. Relationships that proceed in this mode often have religious overtones, but are inevitably carnal and dysfunctional. This is because a projection is a lie that prevents two people from meeting in the truth. Where this is the impetus for a courtship, the relationship will eventually degenerate to the conquering mechanisms that often give rise to licentious behaviour.

With this understanding in mind, an astute counsellor will direct a couple to sanctification and honour. Early on, they will lead them to reflect on the motivations for their relationship, including its initiation. Such a conversation provides an opportunity for the identification of any personal immaturities and identity frailties that may have unhelpfully influenced the couple's commencement of an exclusive relationship. If left unchecked, these developmental limitations will hinder the future viability of a courtship. Where an individual's or a couple's readiness for courtship is uncertain, the counsellor is able to refocus the conversation, and to encourage them to give attention to the matters of personal development that are necessary for meeting another in sanctification and honour. Heb 12:12-13.

The guidance that a counsellor provides to a courting couple will include, among many things, a clear understanding of the need to avoid all promiscuity. Sexual dissipation is a symptom of

relational failure within a courtship. The foundations of trust and respect are violated when a couple is promiscuous prior to marriage. In these instances, one person uses the other for self-gratification, and conquers them as an identity-verifying exercise.

The dysfunction and corruption resulting from sexual promiscuity during courtship is not resolved by a marriage covenant. Instead, the physical union of the couple after marriage only exacerbates the relational failures of their courtship.

The union of a man and woman in marriage should be the expression of 'giving-love'. This is only possible as the couple is made 'one' by receiving a remnant of the Spirit. They are then able to proceed to become one flesh, as an expression of their marriage union.

Importantly, a couple will not receive a remnant of the Spirit from the Lord while ever the cause and effects of their promiscuity in courtship remain unconfessed and unresolved.

During the season of pre-marriage counselling, the minister, or celebrant, will also speak to the couple about other matters related to Christian discipleship. Counsellors will encourage the couple to keep a journal of their courtship journey. They will be able to draw from the content of their journals as they prepare the testimonies that they will share on their wedding day.

By way of summary, this season of preparation for marriage comprises five identifiable phases of growth and development: friendship; romance; courtship; bonding; and engagement. These progressive phases of courtship have been detailed in other notes, which are available on the Lampstand website.

### **Engagement**

At the point of engagement, the couple are beginning to covenant together towards marriage. That is, they are preparing themselves, culturally, for their life together as a new family within the relational setting of an extended family. We note, in this regard, that Jesus defined a household as comprising three generations. Luk 12:51-53.

During this season of engagement, the man does not express headship towards his fiancé. Rather, he exercises headship toward his *own ground*. That

is, the Christian bridegroom will be motivated to maintain clear and open fellowship with his fiancé, her family, and his family. Such an initiative demonstrates the man's commitment to preparing their house for fellowship, house to house, once they are wed.

During their engagement, the couple will prepare the testimonies that will be shared in the wedding service. Their testimonies should reflect the faith that they have personally received during their courtship and through their ongoing fellowship with the celebrant. The couple will also prepare the prayers that they will offer to the Lord following their confession of faith. Their testimonies and prayers are prepared *in fellowship with the celebrant*.

To support this preparation, it is important that the couple understand the distinction between their personal sonship, and the grace that is received from the Lord to be one Spirit and one flesh. We note, in this regard, that every person who is born of God receives the divine nature. 2Pe 1:3-4. Furthermore, through the Holy Spirit, the sons of God are made one with the Lord and with the other members of the body of Christ. 1Co 6:17. Eph 4:4. However, something *more* of the divine nature, which is unique to the covenant of marriage, established by God, is given to a believing couple on their wedding day so that they can be 'heirs *together* of the grace of life'. 1Pe 3:7.

God gives to a Christian couple a *unique* portion of His Spirit, because He seeks godly seed. Mal 2:15. These are children who are born and raised as spiritual, or holy, sons of God. 1Co 7:14. Being made one in this manner was signified in the lives of Abraham and Sarah when their names were changed by receiving a 'remnant', or portion, of Yahweh's own name. Gen 17:5,15. The Lord did this for them so that they could bring forth Isaac according to the Spirit. Gen 17:16,19. Gal 4:29.

Having been made one, the woman then *proceeds from the man*. This principle was foreshadowed when Eve was formed from the rib of Adam. Gen 2:21-23. Moses explained that this oneness is the reason why 'a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'. Gen 2:24. The apostle Paul further elaborated, saying, 'Man is not from woman, *but woman from man*. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this

reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.' 1Co 11:8-10.

In this passage of Scripture, Paul was referring to a ten-piece garland, which was customarily worn by Jewish women to indicate that they were married. He explained that this symbol should have signified that a married woman was submitted to, and proceeding from, the authority of the name that her husband had received from Christ. In our culture, the exchange of rings should signify the same understanding and commitment of a husband and wife to the order of headship.

The process of making covenant culminates in the marriage vows and union of the couple on their wedding day. At this point, the couple is made one by the Lord as He gives to them a remnant of His Spirit.

We note that the couple does not receive a remnant of the Spirit before the wedding day. Rather, in the season of marriage preparation, the couple are obtaining faith to establish the foundations of their household in Christ and to prayerfully request, by faith, the blessing of a remnant of the Spirit on their wedding day.

### **Wedding service format**

The removal of sacramentalism from our approach to Christian marriage will require a change to the format of our wedding services.

Essential to this reform is the recognition that the couple are asking the leaders and the congregation to witness the covenant and vows which they are making. Reflecting this intent, the structure of a wedding service should include five key elements, all of which are overseen and facilitated by the celebrant.

#### **1. Proclamation**

The first element of the wedding service will involve the ministry of the gospel by the celebrant. This declaration should convey the foundational principles of Christian marriage, outlined by the apostle Paul. He announced that the marriage of a man and a woman should reflect the marriage of Christ and His bride, the church. Eph 5:25-29.

The marriage of Christ and the church reveals to us the cultural implications of marriage in the image intended by God for mankind. Paul's

statement is built upon God's own declaration concerning the purpose for marriage. As the prophet Malachi recorded, 'But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.' Mal 2:15.

By commencing the service with the gospel of sonship, the messenger is fulfilling their responsibility and accountability to declare the word from the beginning, which reveals the ground of fellowship upon which the couple can establish their marriage and household. This is the fellowship of the Father and the Son. 1Jn 1:1-3.

Importantly, the celebrant is not accountable for how this message is received. The couple themselves are accountable and responsible for their own response to the word. For this reason, they must take heed to how they build upon the foundation that is extended to them through the gospel.

## **2. Testimony**

Reflecting this key principle, the second element of the wedding service will involve the bride's and the groom's confession of faith for marriage. This element of the service will provide the couple with the opportunity to testify of the faith that they have each received during their courtship, to establish their house in Christ.

The testimonies of the groom and bride will not be scripted for them. Rather, they will have been prepared in fellowship with the celebrant, during the season of engagement. The groom and bride will each read the testimonies that they have prepared, which should be 3-5 minutes in length.

The testimonies of the groom and of the bride should communicate how the couple have found faith for marriage by walking blamelessly before the Lord. That is, they have found faith to walk together as Christians, serving together in the newness of the Spirit and not in the wretchedness of struggling to keep the Law of God as a Christian ideal, without the power that the Holy Spirit gives. They are able to give thanks for the Holy Spirit, who enables joyful and righteous living and courting.

Accordingly, their testimonies should reveal the groom's and the bride's desire to be made one Spirit by receiving a remnant of the Spirit from

the Lord. They are able to acknowledge the Lord's initiative to join them in this manner so that, as they become one flesh, they are able, within the will of God, to bring forth godly seed. Mal 2:15.

Drawing from the example of the Holy Spirit's initiative towards the marriage of Abraham and Sarah, the groom acknowledges that by receiving a remnant of the Spirit, Yahweh is giving to him a unique portion of His name, to form a new household. This results in a fundamental change to the expression of the man's identity, because he is becoming one Spirit and one flesh with his wife. That is, as he turns to Christ and participates in the conversation of sonship, he will receive specific grace from Christ to be the head of this woman, and to become a father of faith. The two have become one.

Similarly, the bride is able to acknowledge that as she joins the conversation of sonship offered to her by her husband, forsaking the fallen presumption to name herself and her household in her own image, she is named anew. This will mark a fundamental change in the expression of her identity, as she now becomes the helper to this man. To this end, she can testify of her faith to proceed from her husband to become a wife and a mother.

The conversation of sonship, to which the couple is committing, is the will of God for their lives and household, which was declared by the Father and finished through the offering of the Son as He journeyed from Gethsemane to Calvary. Being joined together in the fellowship of this offering is the yoke through which they are able to find deliverance from the wearisome and destructive relational dynamics inherited from the fall of mankind. Furthermore, it is the means by which they obtain the blessing of rest and life in all of the circumstances that they will encounter as a married couple and as a family.

Inherent in making these statements is the couple's acknowledgement that they are accountable before the Lord for *how* they marry, and for the *culture* of their marriage and household.

This relieves the messenger/celebrant of the expectation to bless the covenant that the couple are making. The messenger avoids unnecessary judgements about the cultural acceptability of the couple, and is delivered from the demands to bless

a couple, whose marriage covenant may be based upon the idolatry of their heart, rather than on the word of truth. Eze 14:9-10.

### **3. The couple's prayer**

Having testified to the faith that they have received by hearing the gospel and its implications for marriage, the couple will call upon themselves, through prayer, the blessing of the remnant of the Spirit to make them one Spirit and one flesh. In this action, they are calling the name of the Lord upon themselves. They are praying to be joined in one name by receiving from the Lord their unique portion of His name.

Moreover, the couple are asking the Holy Spirit to sanctify them to this unique expression of the remnant of the Spirit, which includes the capacity to bring forth children who are born with the divine nature. In the fear of the Lord, they acknowledge that any violation of the ground upon which they are being established in one Spirit and one flesh, provokes the jealous rebuke of the Spirit.

### **4. Vows**

The couple will make covenant (vows) with each other before the Lord and His people, and will exchange rings, signifying their union. Where appropriate, the father of the bride will be invited to commend the couple to the vows they are about to make.

As they make these vows, under the direction of the celebrant, the couple are 'leaving father and mother' and are made one Spirit and one flesh by the Lord. That is, in response to their confession of faith, and their prayer, the Lord grants to them a remnant of His Spirit, making them one. The man is receiving this unique portion of the Lord's name, and the woman is receiving this name from her husband.

The vows that the couple make are simple statements that communicate the reality of this union and also meet the requirements of the law of the land. These statements, outlined below, have been approved for use in accordance with the rites of RFI.

#### Celebrant:

[Groom's name] and [Bride's name], as you enter the covenant of marriage, do not swear falsely, but perform your oaths to the Lord. Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'. Mat 5:33-37.

#### Groom's Vows:

Having requested, through prayer, a remnant of the Spirit, these are my vows before God and this congregation. By faith:

I accept the call to honour Christ's lordship, and to offer myself in headship to [Bride].

I will love my wife as Christ loved the church.

I will establish our marriage in the cross of Christ, as the source of the wisdom and power of God.

I will worship in the fellowship of the body of Christ, publicly, and from house to house.

Forsaking all other vows, I take you, [Bride], and you only, in sanctification and honour, as my wife in Christian marriage.

I will love and worship you in body, soul and spirit; in sickness and health; for richer; for poorer; until death parts us.

#### Bride's Vows

Having requested, through prayer, a remnant of the Spirit, these are my vows before God and this congregation. By faith:

I accept the call to honour Christ's lordship, and to offer myself as helper to [Groom].

I will submit to my husband in the Spirit of Christ.

I will sanctify myself to the cross of Christ in our marriage, as the source of the wisdom and power of God.

I will worship in the fellowship of the body of Christ, publicly, and from house to house.

Forsaking all other vows, I take you, [Groom], and you only, in sanctification and honour, as my husband in Christian marriage.

I will love and worship you in body, soul and spirit; in sickness and health; for richer; for poorer; until death parts us.

#### Celebrant:

The use of a symbol, denoting the marriage union of a man and a woman, is acknowledged and blessed in the Scriptures. [Groom] and [Bride] will now exchange rings.

The groom and bride exchange rings.

## **5. Commendation**

The final element of the wedding service will be the prayer of the congregation, led by the celebrant. Through prayer, the congregation commends the couple to their vows.

### **The groom and bride's attendants**

In preparation for the wedding day, the groom and the bride will be encouraged to invite the involvement of attendants (e.g. groomsmen and bridesmaids) who are able to support, exhort and commend the couple to the union that they are establishing in Christ. This applies to all couples, including those who are older or who are marrying for a second time.

The involvement of attendants as part of a wedding party is attested to in the Scriptures. For example, John the Baptist identified himself as 'the friend of the groom', or Christ's 'best man'. He said, 'He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.' Joh 3:29.

Similarly, the Song of Songs nominates key parties who are able to encourage the bride and groom to their vows, and to bear witness to the couple's faith for marriage in the image intended by God. For example, Solomon identified the contributions of 'the daughters of Jerusalem', who were the friends of the bride; the brothers of the bride; the friends of the bridegroom; and the relatives of the couple.

In preparation for the wedding day, the celebrant should engage with the wedding party to instruct them, and exhort them, towards their support of the couple, and to their sanctified participation in the culture of the service.

### **Music**

Music will continue to be a feature of wedding services, supporting the entries of the groom and his attendants, and the bride and her attendants, and the exit of the bridal party at the conclusion of the service.

Community choruses should also feature during the service as a point of participation and worship for the wedding party and guests. For example, a worship chorus could be sung following the proclamation of the gospel and then at the conclusion of the couple's prayers.

The music for the service will be facilitated by the church, who will appoint musicians and singers to support the worship expression of the service.

### **Post-service refreshments**

Following the wedding service, the church may provide cake and drinks to refresh the attendees as the couple signs the wedding register. These refreshments would be a gift from the church to the couple.

No speeches would be made during this element of the event, as the expression of the celebrant and the couple will have been adequately represented during the service.

### **Family celebration**

While not formally a part of the wedding service, the couple would also be encouraged to have an *agape* meal with family, friends, and church leaders, following the service, as the first such initiative of their new house.

The focus of this gathering would be on fellowship, and on continuing to commend the couple towards their covenant vows, with appropriate involvement from family and friends. In this regard, the culture of the celebration should reflect the couple's confession of faith for their new house in Christ.