FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

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The fact that marriage is one of the oldest traditions in human culture has resulted in a large variety of wedding ceremonies. Given the character of this column, we will just focus on some of the history and practices of Christian marriages, and then on what we have agreed upon in Article 63 of the Church Order. It is good to reflect on this. Despite the changes in our modern culture, young folks in the church are still committing themselves to married life "for better for worse, for richer for poorer," to use a phrase from the traditional marriage vows in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Knowing a bit of the history of Christian marriage can help us understand why we solemnize marriages as we do today and can perhaps also show us aspects we tend to overlook.

AMBIGUITY FOR CENTURIES

In the Roman Catholic church of the Middle Ages, marriage had become a sacrament. That means that everything related to marriage was the sole responsibility of the church. Civil authorities were not involved. After the Reformation, however, things became a bit more complicated. The first Reformed Synod (Emden 1571) stated that marriage was partly ecclesiastical and partly political or civil. But it was not quite clear who was responsible for what, and how this connection should function.

This ambiguity continued throughout the next centuries, with the churches solemnizing most marriages while urging civil authorities to take responsibility for regulating uniformity of practice

and stipulations. This is reflected in the article on marriage in the Church Order of Dort 1618/19 (Art 70). In 1795–1796, in The Netherlands, civil marriage became mandatory.

It is good that the government, as responsible for proper order in public society, sets standards for a legitimate marriage, and for mutual obligations and rights in marriage. But that does not mean that, for God's people, the church does not have a role to play. In the 19th century, "ecclesiastical confirmation" of marriages in the church became the standard practice. This could (and can) only take place after the couple can show proof that they were legally married in a civil ceremony. There was, however, still uncertainty about the significance of the church "confirming" or "blessing" a marriage when a couple is married already. This can be seen in how this matter shows up in the church order. General Synod (GS) 1893 removed Article 70 from the Church Order without changing the numbers. Between 1893 and 1905 there was nothing in the Church Order about marriage. Article 70 was simply vacant. When GS 1905 revised the Church Order it added a new Article 70: *Since it is proper that the matrimonial state be confirmed before Christ's Church, according to the Form in use for that purpose, the consistories shall attend to it.*

NEW IMMIGRANTS – NEW RULES

This became the original article on marriage in the Canadian Reformed Church Order. The problem was, however, that this stipulation did not fit with the practice of solemnizing marriages in Canada. The brothers at the first CanRC Synod realized this. They did not remove Article 70, but added a note that "the observance of this article is left in the freedom of the churches."[1] In hindsight, one wonders how helpful this was. It is understandable that for early immigrants from The Netherlands it would take time to get used to the different role of the church in solemnizing marriages. But the decision of GS 1954 did nothing to clarify that role. And the ground for this decision did not help either. It says "that it

[1] National Synod Homewood/Carman 1954, Acts art.74. See also GS Orangeville 1968, supplement 12, p.125

cannot be proven from the Word of God that blessing or confirming the matrimonial state in the presence of the church is proper." Even if this is true, it does not remove the old ambiguity about the ecclesiastical aspect of marriage. Today, we go by what we have agreed upon about solemnizing marriages in Article 63 of the Church Order. Because of the drastic developments in our modern culture the first paragraph was added in 2007,[2] but the rest was formulated in 1983.

JUST A PRIVATE AFFAIR?

A Christian marriage involves the family, the civil government, and the church. Indeed, the church has a vested interest in Christian marriage.

In Canada the provincial government takes responsibility for the legal and social consequences of marriage in public society. To control this, it requires that marriages are only solemnized by those who have been registered as authorized for this task. Those who have solemnized a marriage must inform the relevant government officials. The church order is silent about this role of the government. That makes sense, given the character of this ecclesiastical document. And yet, when it comes to marriages, the government executes its authority through the church, by registering only ministers ordained by the church as officiants for marriage.

The church respects this arrangement, while at the same time keeping its own standards and responsibilities. In other words, the church will only abide by the civil regulations as long as these are not in conflict with God's Word.[3] This is also explicitly stated in the second paragraph of Article 63 CO. Here the churches agree on the task of the consistories to set the parameters for allowing the ministers to solemnize marriages: members of the congregations must marry only in the Lord and ministers are only authorized to solemnize marriages that are in accordance with God's Word. This gives the church a vital interest in the marriages of its members.

For a long time, the dominant view has been that a marriage is not an ecclesiastical or congregational matter, but a family affair. And thus, a wedding is a private ceremony that does not belong in a public worship service. The provision in the last paragraph of Article 63, that it may take place in a worship service, is then seen as an unfortunate leftover from the old Dutch tradition. But perhaps there is more to it.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH?

The parameters in the second paragraph of Article 63 reflect that the consistory must actively exercise supervision over the marriages of the members of the church. One of the tools for this is that the church provides marriage classes for those preparing for married life. I hope we all agree that it is a pastoral responsibility to instruct those who are engaged to be married as to what a marriage in the Lord looks like, and how marriage as an institution of God should reflect the unity of Christ and his church (Eph 5:22–33). When the consistory announces an upcoming marriage, it also includes the congregation in this, by asking whether there are any lawful objections. And the one who solemnizes the marriage does so as minister of the Word, under the supervision of the consistory and with the use of an official, ecclesiastically adopted Form.

When the role of the church is so significant for a Christian marriage, I wonder: how can such a marriage not be considered an ecclesiastical or congregational matter, but just a private affair? Some may think: what would actually be the practical difference for how we solemnize the marriages of our church members? Does marriage as an ecclesiastical matter imply, for instance, that the marriage must be officiated in a public worship service? To make that a requirement would probably be a step too far, for a number of reasons. That said, it is a valid alternative, and there are good reasons to keep both possibilities in Article 63, that "a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service." The second option should not be dismissed as an unfortunate leftover from the past.

The strong emphasis on marriage as just a private affair has led to a practice where more and more marriages are solemnized at a private venue, rather than in the church. That can be the family backyard, a golf course, a winery, a resort on a remote island, you name it. This makes the occasion only accessible for invited family and friends. Apart from a minister for the legal paperwork, the congregation is excluded. That is unfortunate. Moving your wedding away from the church geographically weakens the awareness that the church has anything to do with it.

Even if we don't make it a public worship service, should it not be a delight to solemnize a Christian marriage in the midst of a joyful gathering of God's people? It would require a different mindset when planning your wedding: make your local church the venue and invite the whole congregation. It would also require a different mindset in the congregation: a brother and sister in Christ are united in marriage. Let's praise the Lord with them. I believe this will show more respect for the ecclesiastical aspect of a Christian marriage.

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[2] GS Smithers, 2007, Acts art.156

[3] See the grounds for the decision referred to in note 2.