

# Marriage - An Institution of God

## *The solemnization of marriage*

### A. Introduction

The last liturgical form is the *solemnization of marriage*. Marriage solemnization has received a place that we cannot imagine being without. A wedding day is not complete when there is no solemnization of the marriage and the accompanying prayer of intercession.<sup>1</sup> We are talking here about a solemnization that is more than just a custom. Article 63 of the Church Order stipulates that the consistory “shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord”. This refers to an agreement made within the federation of churches. The couple should not decide for themselves whether their wedding will be solemnized or not.

What, exactly, is the significance of a solemnization of marriage? What does the word solemnize mean?

As far as the form itself is concerned, is the position of the woman not judged rather negatively?

Using the form we will discuss the solemnization of the marriage and also try to answer these questions.

### B. Marriage is a binding covenant

The marriage bond is solid and strong. Those who marry do not sign a social contract from which they can conveniently be released at a later date. They sign a covenant for life. This is how God instituted marriage. The form correctly speaks of a *marriage bond*. Its binding character is evidently very strong. Scripture teaches us that the unity between a man and his wife is a reflection of the unity between God and his people.

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| Ezekiel 16:8ff.   | God's covenant with Israel is depicted as a marriage.  |
| Hosea 2:18-19     | God takes his covenant people as his bride.  |
| Isaiah 54:5       | Israel's husband is Israel's maker, namely the LORD.   |
| Proverbs 2:17     | Unfaithfulness in marriage is comparable to unfaithfulness to God's covenant.  |
| Malachi 2:10ff.   | When you know God as your Father, you cannot be untrue in marriage.<br>The relationship between husband and wife also reflects the relationship between Christ and his church. |
| Ephesians 5:22ff. | Just as Christ loves his church, the man must love and guide his wife. There is also the comparison of the bridal couple and a bridal feast.                                   |

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<sup>1</sup>Tr. note: In the Netherlands, the civil marriage ceremony of most Christians is generally followed by a marriage solemnization in a church. The wedding service almost always takes place on the same day as the wedding. The solemnization is sometimes postponed until the following Sunday (but this is an exception).

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| Revelation 19:7    | The marriage feast of the lamb anticipates the awaiting splendour; the church is called Christ's bride. |
| Revelation 21:2, 9 | More images of the bride, i.e. the church as the bride of Christ, the lamb.                             |
| Revelation 22:17   | The church on earth symbolizes the bride.   |

It is incorrect to make marriage a sacrament, as the Roman Catholic Church has done. Marriage is not a sign and seal of God's promise. It is about the promises of husband and wife to each other. Paul calls marriage a *mystery* in Ephesians 5:32. This refers to the unity in marriage which is strongly emphasized in Genesis 2, and may be seen as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and his church.

### **C. Necessary instruction**

The marriage form in our *Book of Praise* is a revised version of a form from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which was adopted and translated from the Church Order of the Paltz by Dathenus.<sup>2</sup> It was rewritten because of its length and wordiness.

In the current form, the meaning of marriage is presented concisely and clearly. The tone of the form is instructional. The arguments used from Scripture are persuasive.

Both young and old must be constantly reminded about what God says about marriage. In pastoral conversations between the minister and the bridal couple, the contents of the form will have been discussed. In reality, young people ought to be introduced much earlier to the subject of marriage and preparation for marriage. In catechism classes for older youth, this subject should not be avoided.

Engaged young couples need to be given guidance, which can be done by speaking to them about the Bible's definition of marital faithfulness, sexuality, and family planning, as opposed to modern ideas of co-habitation. Young people should be able to find willing listeners for the problems they face.

Preparation for marriage begins already in the family. Open discussions are necessary, because adolescents must learn to see the value of marriage. *Getting married* does not mean getting a 'license'. Rather, it means to publicly promise to be *true* to each other for life. The marriage form gives the necessary preparatory instruction.

### **D. Meaning of the ceremony**

The ceremony during which the marriage is solemnized is also of great value. Through the sermon, and especially through the use of the form, those present are instructed in and confronted with Scriptural principles and norms for marriage.

An important aspect is that those who have their marriage solemnized may be reminded of that fact by the congregation and/or witnesses at a later time, should this be called for. Although it concerns the whole congregation, a couple can also be married in a private (or family) ceremony, in the minister's study for example.

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<sup>2</sup>The form in the Dutch church book dates back to 1981.

## E. The meaning of solemnization of marriage

When a marriage is *solemnized*, the union is officially *sanctioned*. It becomes *legal* or *lawful* after promises of faithfulness have been exchanged.<sup>3</sup>

In previous centuries the church did indeed solemnize marriages. In the first centuries after Christ, the church was only marginally involved in the marriages. This changed when the church of the Middle Ages assumed total control over wedding ceremonies. The church *solemnized* and *blessed* the marriages (as a sacrament).

The Reformers, however, held that the solemnization of marriage was a matter for the civil government. But since the authorities at that time often did not want to be burdened with a wedding registry, the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later continued to perform the marriage ceremonies. The term *solemnization* made its way into the marriage form at this point.

After the French Revolution and the French occupation of the Netherlands, the authorities instituted a separation between church and state. Thus the official (legal) civil marriage ceremony once more became a matter for the *civil* authorities in the Netherlands in 1809.

After 1892, the Reformed Churches (in the Netherlands) were firmly convinced that the marriage ceremony by the civic authorities was deficient or inadequate. The solemnization in the church became a necessary addition to the civil ceremony, for the completion of the marriage ceremony. The authorities (in the Netherlands) act on 'neutral' ground, while the church acts on the basis of the covenant of grace. The two spheres of life as developed and propagated by Dr. Abraham Kuyper was the source for this conviction.

The General Synod of Hattem (1972) had to deal with a proposal to abolish the solemnization of marriage and limit the wedding ceremony only to preaching the Word and invoking the blessing. Synod, however, wanted to keep on using the term '*bevestiging*' and gave it the following connotation: "to bind the marriage to the Word of the Lord". The idea that the religious ceremony is merely a supplement to the civil ceremony was hereby dismantled.

In a secular society with a 'neutral' government, there is much to be said for this kind of 'binding'. The form for the solemnization of marriage is far more profound than the civil statutes regarding this issue.

## F. The main points of the form

The notice of a proposed marriage on two consecutive Sundays (i.e. 'the banns') is followed by the form's introductory part. It ascertains that there are no lawful objections or impediments to the marriage so that the solemnization can take place.

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<sup>3</sup> Tr. note: In the Netherlands the civil ceremony is lawful and precedes the church ceremony.

The following matters are considered:

- *Marriage is an institution of God*
- *God hates divorce*
- *The purpose of marriage*
- *The relationship in marriage*
- *God's promise*
- *The duties to each other*
- *The marriage vows*
- *The prayer of intercession*

### **1. Marriage is an institution of God**

The form refers back to creation for the origin of marriage. By creating the differences between men and women, God made the provision for marriage. It follows from this distinction that homosexual relations are against God's decree. These cannot and may not result in marriage.

The creation of Eve out of the body of Adam underscores how solid the bond of marriage is. Therefore, getting married is a very important step in life. The Lord indicates this in Genesis 2:24. Three issues are named in this passage:

#### a. Leaving the home of the parents

This happens with the approval of the parents. Here is the basis for the official marriage solemnization, which may differ in various cultures and eras. In general, it has a public character, occurring among witnesses. A loose, uncommitted, unregistered relationship (i.e. a common-law relationship) should be rejected.

#### b. The husband shall 'be united to' his wife (Genesis 2:24)

He enters into a close relationship with her, because they love each other. Only within the marriage relationship is sexual intercourse sanctioned by God. Sexual intercourse outside of or before the marriage results in division, rather than in the unity which God decrees.

#### c. In this manner husband and wife become one flesh

They form a unique unity and oneness in body and soul. In Genesis 2 the woman is called a *helper* who befits man. This word is not used in a belittling or discriminating fashion. As part of God's plan, Adam discovered that he was lonely, while the animals had partners. He felt that he needed help, and received in Eve the needed support to live according to God's will. In marriage, husband and wife are each other's *alter ego*, or second self.

*Comments: The institution of marriage by God does not mean that to be married is the only normal way to live. Not everyone is destined to be married. The command in Genesis 2:24 is apparently not meant for everyone, because God himself has barred the way to marriage for some. An unmarried person is by no means an incomplete person. Think of Paul, who was not married. The life of a single person also has usefulness and meaning for his fellow men and for God. Every person has received the possibility to be a helper for others, depending upon the task God has given. As well, married couples do*

*not live exclusively for each other. Their marriage does not isolate them from the congregation and society. On the new earth there will be no marriages. The redeemed will then be “like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30).*

The decision to marry is subject to the condition of physical and spiritual maturity, just as Adam was ‘prepared’ for his marriage. A suitable time of preparation is essential for a marriage in which the couple can completely accept each other and remain faithful.

## **2. God forbids divorce**

In the section on the institution of marriage, the form strongly emphasizes the sin of adultery, which the Lord forbids in the seventh commandment of his law. The Bible is very explicit about this subject.

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| Matthew 5:31-32       | A marriage may never be broken and dissolved (or annulled), except in the case of adultery.   |
| Matthew 19:3-9        | God does not tolerate adultery and divorce (Genesis 2); the sole purpose of the letter of divorce was to regulate a recognized divorce.   |
| Malachi 2:13-16       | Because the Lord himself is true to his covenant promise, he strongly opposes unfaithfulness in the marriage covenant; he does not want people to disown each other.  |
| 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 | A separated couple must be reconciled, or both must remain unmarried; a second marriage is not possible, because in this case man and woman are not independent in the eyes of the Lord.                            |
| 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 | In the case of ‘mixed’ marriages (one spouse has remained an unbeliever), the believer does not have to cast off the unbeliever. When an unbeliever leaves a believer, the latter may have to settle for a divorce. |

*Comment: 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 disapproves of mixed marriages. In Corinth marriages became mixed because either the husband or the wife did not become a Christian. The Bible actually warns against marriage with an unbeliever (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14-16). God’s entire institution of marriage strongly warns against marriage with an unbeliever.*

*Summary:* A marriage may not be dissolved, except in cases of adultery or willful desertion by an unbeliever. Husband and wife are inseparably pledged until death parts them. The form gives a strong argument against the divorce laws established in our country.<sup>4</sup> The civil law there accepts only one argument: “lasting disruption”, which can be interpreted very broadly.

## **3. The purpose of marriage**

Two points of the form summarize the purpose of marriage

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<sup>4</sup> The civil law in the Netherlands since 1971 accepts only one argument: “lasting disruption”, which can be interpreted very broadly.

- to completely belong to each other and to help “each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and to the life to come”
- to continue and increase the human race under the blessing of God; to raise and nurture children that may be born to them, to the glory of God and the upbuilding of the church.

From this two-fold purpose we can draw the following conclusions:

- a. A mixed marriage cannot fulfill these duties and is therefore unacceptable. In the event of mixed courtship this issue must be addressed in a frank and straightforward manner. Unity in faith and in church membership are necessary if the courtship is to develop into wholesome marriage.
- b. The primary purpose of marriage makes it clear that a childless marriage does not miss its goal, since the unity of man and wife is nevertheless experienced.
- c. When a husband and wife live in disharmony and are negligent in raising their children, they do not fulfill the purpose of their marriage. Such a marriage is in danger of breaking up, even if it does not result in a *divorce*. Loving one another and remaining faithful generates the energy for a marriage to fulfill its purpose.

#### **4. *The relationship in the marriage***

A substantial portion of the form for the solemnization is devoted to the mutual relationship in marriage. Ephesians 5:22-23 teaches that the man, as the head, has authority over his wife. He guides, protects, and cares for her. The woman entrusts herself in obedience to the leadership of her husband. This last sentence paraphrases the expression “submit to” in Ephesians 5:23 and 24. This expression raises misunderstanding because this is not what is meant in Ephesians 5. The headship and authority of the husband means that he must lead and take initiative. In this context, to “submit” means to freely place oneself under the ordinances of God. A married woman is to take the place that God gives her. This also applies to the man.

Husband and wife complement each other, but they are not duplicates. Their different roles foster the harmony in a marriage. This is directly opposed to the feminist ideology, which sees men and women as being completely identical and able to exchange roles readily.

#### **5. *God's promise***

The form recognizes that no marriage runs its course without problems, sorrow, and sin. This is not mentioned to put a damper on the wedding day. It is realistic to recognize that one cannot enter marriage with exaggerated romantic notions. The promise of God found in Psalm 123, explicitly quoted in the form, gives much encouragement.

#### **6. *The duties to each other***

Obviously, the form describes the mutual obligations in much greater detail than the civil law does. A marriage in accordance with the gospel requires the couple to commit themselves to the Word of God. Therefore, a marriage ceremony between baptized

members who are not ready to make profession of faith should not really take place. In any event, it should remain the exception to the rule. One who can answer in the affirmative to the marriage form should also be able to answer in the affirmative by making public profession of faith. The rule that the bridal couple should be confessing members is a sound one.

### **7. Vows of faithfulness**

The questions directed to the bridal couple summarize concisely and specifically all that has been said before. Both know what they are saying yes to; both are committed.

### **8. The prayer of intercession**

The prayer concludes the ceremony, during which the bridal couple kneel. In the Netherlands, kneeling is no longer mandatory; however, our marriage form has: “you *shall* kneel before the Lord”. Every church has the freedom to omit this in specific cases. Nonetheless, it is significant that a bridal couple kneels during this prayer. This position emphasizes that the congregation, which surrounds them in spirit, prays for them. God is thanked for the *gift* of this marriage. The congregation also prays for the couple to receive the blessing of the covenant in connection with their *great task* in this marriage.

## **G. Summary**

God has given rich possibilities for the married state, so that the couple may serve God and their neighbour. Although married life is not the only way to live according to God’s plan, he did ordain the distinction between man and woman, so that the possibility of marriage exists.

Marriage is a covenant which, in principle, cannot be broken. The willful desertion of an unbelieving partner and adultery are the only reasons for separation. The solemnization of marriage with its accompanying Biblical instruction are needed to restrain the influence of the dangerous powers around us.

## **H. Tips for the introduction**

1. Marriage is not a casual, uncommitted relationship between two people, but a binding covenant. By using the included text references, show what God’s purpose for marriage is. In this connection pay special attention to the arrangement of ‘living together’ without God’s approval.
2. Compare the requirements of the civil law to the form for the solemnization of marriage. Show how the approach of this form is much more profound.

## **I. For discussion**

1. Should the wedding invitation say “the solemnization will take place”, or “God’s blessing will be asked”?
2. Would it be preferable to move the marriage ceremony to a Sunday worship service?

How can one prevent turning the ceremony into an occasion for relatives and friends only?

3. What is the meaning of “and he will rule over you” in Genesis 3:16 in connection with “be subject to him” and summarized by “accept his guidance and assist him in all good things”(see marriage form)?
4. When is remarriage after divorce acceptable? Does this not bar the road to reconciliation?
5. May the willful desertion referred to in 1 Corinthians 7:15 be extended to any form of marital desertion?
6. How can children be prepared for marriage or singleness? Is there something positive to be said for courses for engaged or married couples?

**How can we effectively oppose premarital sex?**

Meindert Huibert Sliggers