

CHANGING BRIDES, CHANGING SERVICES

Baptist Times 9 June 2005

Much water has gone under the bridge since Martin Luther wrote to a friend, “Grace and peace in Christ – and authority over your wife”, or since John Calvin declared that a woman is “a kind of appendage” and a “lesser helpmeet” who “by nature is born to obey”. In the last fifty years or so a social revolution has taken place. Wives are no longer household drudges there to fulfil every little whim of their husbands. Married women have become persons in their own right, and are no longer as dependent upon their husbands as they once were. Most now have jobs of their own, with some earning as much if not more than their husbands.

Not surprisingly these changes in the position of women have been reflected in the marriage service. Years ago only one ring was used: the man gave a ring to the woman. The ring was a sign that the woman belonged to the man – she was his property. Today, almost every couple give rings to one another as a sign that they belong to one another. The woman is no longer a chattel

Not so long ago every bride was given away by her father. ‘Who gives this woman to be married to this man?’ the minister would ask. ‘I do’, the proud father would say. Although many brides still want to be given away, the custom is no longer universal. Significantly, it is no longer to be found in any modern wedding liturgy. For it reflects a time when a woman was not a person in her own right – until the time of her marriage the woman belonged to her father; in the marriage ceremony the property rights were effectively transferred to her new husband. Now increasingly the minister asks the congregation: ‘Will you, the families and friends of N & N, support and uphold them in their marriage now and in the years to come?’, to which everybody replies with a resounding ‘We will’.

Logically, the custom of the father walking his bride down the aisle should also disappear, for that too smacks of the daughter being the property of her fathers. Instead it would make more sense for the couple to walk in together, hand in hand. But at this point logic tends to go out of the window.

The most significant change to the marriage service is found in the marriage vows themselves. Years ago the woman promised not only to “to love and cherish” her husband, but also to “obey” him. In the 1980 Anglican *Alternative Service Book* the promise to “obey” became an optional extra. 20 years later in the new Anglican *Common Worship* service book, the promise to “obey” is no longer found at all. The same change has taken place in Baptist weddings, and to my mind rightly so. For it represents a past social pattern. Certainly for Paul, the important issue was not that wives should obey their husbands (at that time that wasn’t an option) but that husbands should love their wives as the church (now that was a radical option!).

With the vast majority of marriages involving couples already living together, what further changes, I wonder, should we be making?

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