

Ethically Wed: Towards Guilt-Free Celebrations

Précis

This essay seeks to engage the ethical weddings movement, critique in the light of theological validity and to provide a sound understanding of Christian ethical responsibility in regards to weddings.

Following an ethical model developed in the context of a post-modern, post-Christian culture, this essay seeks to provide a culturally valid approach to applying Christian values to the ethical issues raised.

Introduction

Every girl wants to feel like a princess on her wedding day... or so we are brought up to think. We strive for that perfect day of royalty-worthy adoration and luxury. Culturally, we women, blushing brides-to-be, expect the world.

And this expectation is quite literally costing the earth.

'Green weddings' is an almost counter-cultural movement that seeks to change the values placed on weddings by changing the expectations and practice of weddings. This is achieved by seeking to minimise carbon-footprints and allocate funds to clear-conscience providers; to simplify, individualise and value a truly important day. Ruth Culver, an 'eco-chic' wedding planner, says that ethical weddings are about removing oneself from the glossy, mass-produced wedding treadmill and individualising and becoming a reflection of the couple's life choices - 'its about making choices.. [decisions] you make can have a positive or a negative effect.' (The Guardian, Saturday May 5, 2007). These choices can be as simple as choosing local produce and suppliers to minimise the carbon footprint produced and choosing fair trade or micro-enterprise suppliers; but can extend to choosing peace silk¹, using natural dyes rather than chemicals or insect-based ones², avoiding hot-house flowers and sweat-shop produced goods, carbon-offsetting honeymoon plane trips, and using conflict-free and clean diamonds and green gold.

¹ Silk is produced by silk worms. In standard silk production, most of these worms are killed in boiling water as the silk is being prepared for weaving. Peace silk is prepared by removing the silk worms from the raw fibre prior to its preparation process.

² A number of dyes used in fabrics and food colouring is obtained at the expense of animal life - Cochineal, the bright red-purple colouring is in fact a bug. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochineal>)

Proponents of this movement seek to throw off the traditional wedding of their parents' generation, and the value that has been attached to a great number of the traditions therein, and to embrace new traditions that honour our resources, our life choices and our planet.

This essay seeks to engage this movement, and to provide a rational and theologically sound understanding of 'ethical' weddings but also to evaluate its core values by discussing the theological implications as well. Rather than to 'overthrow' the wedding industry, this essay seeks to encourage couples to think clearly through the ethical implications of some issues that may not be immediately obvious, and to make decisions then based on that information. Whilst this essay is not a 'wedding handbook', it will also seek to provide practical applications in line with the theological and ethical outcomes.

Post-modern Ethical Reasoning

Post-modernity has impacted Western society profoundly. One of the more radical outcomes of the post-modern paradigm shift is that the most commonly understood ethical frameworks, namely deontological and teleological reasoning, have become woefully inadequate to describe a system of ethics that is no longer heavily dependent on modernist framework.

Modernity understood truth to be an absolute - that everything was pinned upon and revolved around core absolute truths. Ethical reasoning, therefore, was the pursuit of understanding everything in terms of either good or bad *outcomes* or good or bad intrinsic *value*. Both types of reasoning hinge on the underlying value that there is an absolute yardstick with which something can be measured. Even the underlying understanding of *doing* good versus *being* good is infused with the principle of actual absolute truth which underpins doing and being.

Post-modernity shifted the focus by removing the concept of absolute truth. Beginning with

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the understanding that language shapes culture and culture shapes individuals, post-modernity posits that language and culture define truth, and therefore, truth can be understood to be relativised; culture performs the function of glasses through which reality is viewed (Greer. 2003:225).

What is left is a system of ethics that seeks to provide the individual concerned with the greatest quotient of satisfaction that they have done their best to maintain integrity with their values.

In understanding an ethical framework concerning weddings, it is vital to underline that this essay is primarily concerned with providing tools with which to challenge the culture of weddings to move toward a more theologically and ethically sound place.

Framework

For the purposes of this discussion, the framework for the critique is defined as three key components. These components provide shape and clarity for the discussion. This frame also provides a clear delineation between the things *outside* the scope of discussion and those within its scope. In this particular instance, the defining boundaries of our frame consist of: Responsibility; Theology and Tradition.

Not all of these components have equal value in this equation, however. If we understand theology to be the base, horizontal beam of our triangle, we find that we have a solid starting place. Adding responsibility and tradition as counterpoint sides creates the whole.

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In order for this framework to be meaningful, each of our three components requires definition.

Theology

This discussion approaches the ethics of wedding celebrations from the undeniable position of Christian theology. The assumption is that God is involved in human history; has left a record of his dealings with humanity in order to provide examples and lessons from which we can learn of his heart and his will for us, individually and collectively as a people. While there is little, if anything, to be said explicitly about the ethics of a wedding, there is solid body of material that speaks to responsibility, to celebration, and to tradition.

Tradition

Tradition is an ambiguous concept in Australian culture. Whilst many cultures from around the world have brought strong and clearly defined traditions with them to Australia, intermarriage and cultural absorption have blurred the lines around many of the traditions. Even within what could be considered 'white Anglo-Saxon Aussie' tradition, the breadth of variety is vast. This discussion will begin from the premise that Australian weddings contain a number of indisputable traditions that are coloured by history, religion, and circumstance. Rather than provide an in-depth discussion of world-wide wedding customs – an essay better suited to another forum – this essay will discuss tradition itself as an object to be deconstructed, evaluated and utilised in a meaningful manner.

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Responsibility

Grounded in relationship with God, and supported by an understanding of the value of tradition, responsibility sits as the conclusion of the set. This discussion will deal with the shifting sense of responsibility, particularly amongst the generation identified as post-modern. This part of the framework discusses whom we are responsible to and why, as well as the implications of that responsibility.

Getting Married, the Biblical Way

Biblically, it is difficult to build a robust theology of a wedding ceremony. There are few mentions of weddings at all in the Old or the New Testament³, but the few references available reveal several factors in common - firstly, the gathering together of the community, secondly, a feast, and thirdly, a covenant.

The Biblical example, although brief, provides a useful overview of what Jewish tradition valued in a wedding - community, hospitality, faith.

What is present, however, in the Bible is a strong understanding of personal responsibility for behaviour and choices. Micah 6:8 succinctly provides us with a mission statement that should define a theology for weddings –

He has shown you, o man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (NIV).

Jesus' proclamation in Luke 4 also provides a clear picture of the desired outcome of the

³ Genesis 2:22 – Adam and Eve; Genesis 29:14-30 – Jacob and Leah and Rachel; John 2 – the wedding at Cana;

presence of God in the world:

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:18-19 NIV).

Significantly, Christian theology understands this statement to be inherited by believers to define their role in the world.

In a post-Christian world, it is vitally important for Christians to be able to develop a solid ethical framework that has validity in a post-modern context. Being able to quote a text from the Bible concerning the issue and claiming that 'God said it, so it's true and that's enough for me' no longer carries any validity in a cultural context. However, developing a theological framework for Christian living that demonstrates that God has provided practical principles for daily living that value and respect others and the environment IS a valid post-modern argument.

These two passages from Micah and Luke together provide the basis of a theologically motivated praxis for ethical weddings. Acting justly, loving mercy, walking humbly, and desiring to see freedom for the oppressed and prisoners are core values that provide the underpinning theology for the following sections.

The Ethical Wedding Movement

Largely centred in the UK and Europe, the ethical wedding movement is gaining popularity, mostly amongst the sector of the community that would probably be roundly labelled

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‘alternative’ by mainstream society. The supporters of the movement typically hold several key ideas as the core values that motivate an ethical, or ‘green’, wedding.

These are:

- Meaning over substance
- Financial responsibility
- Low environmental impact
- Fair trade and cruelty free⁴

What this means in real terms is that the ethical wedding movement values thoughtful and considerate planning of weddings, rather than the extravagance that is so commonly central in Western weddings.

But what makes ‘thoughtfulness’ ethical?

Perhaps the core questions at the centre of this discussion are:

Is having a ‘dream wedding’ justifiable when it places families, and the new couple, thousands of dollars in debt - just for the sake of the show⁵? Is this ‘walking humbly’?

Is it justifiable when the event damages the environment? Is this acting justly?

Is it justifiable when it perpetuates subsistence slavery? Is this ‘proclaiming freedom for the prisoners and the release of the oppressed’?

Is it justifiable when the rituals and symbols used actually representation oppression?

Can this possibly be ‘loving mercy’?

⁴ This summary of core values of the ethical wedding movement is not a delineated list available in any literature. It is a summary of a broad range of information available on ethical weddings websites available on the internet. These websites are listed in the Bibliography.

⁵ The typical wedding in Australia will cost the average young couple between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/10/30/1099028262537.html>: October 31, 2004) ; <http://www.perthnow.com.au/lifestyle/average-wedding-now-50000/story-e6frg3pl-111118892208>: February 17, 2009)

The answers to those questions illustrate why ‘thoughtfulness’ produces an ethical wedding.

Towards a praxis of ethical weddings

Developing a robust application of ethical understanding requires an analysis of some of the core issues. Whilst this essay does not cover all the possible topics that are available for discussion concerning developing an ethic for weddings, the following discussions aim to highlight the application of ‘thoughtful’ ethics.

Proclaim freedom - fair trade and fancy-free

The West is perceived by other parts of the world as decadent - wasteful, frivolous. We waste time, energy, resources... we take for granted the abundance that surrounds us. And it is easy to do so. With a high disposable income compared to the developing world, and surrounded by cheap consumables, it is a simple matter to be drawn into a lifestyle with a high-waste, low-concern quotient. It is significant that a substantial proportion of the food and goods that the West consumes regularly comes to us cheaply at the cost of the quality of life of people in other parts of the world. The sudden prominence in the media of fair trade chocolate and coffee beans, whilst a positive move in the right direction by several big corporations, overshadows the extent to which unfair trade affects the world - especially the third world.

Consider this. Tea, coffee, chocolate, gold, diamonds, paper, many dress fabrics and embellishments and some flowers used in an average wedding probably don't originate in Australia. And chances are, unless the choice is deliberately made otherwise, these products are made by subsistence slaves. Subsistence slavery, or wage slavery, is the condition that many sweatshop and field workers find themselves in. Paid barely enough to survive, let alone to strive to make their lives better, these workers toil for unendurably long hours to

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produce common items that we take for granted at such a low cost that it is financially beneficial for companies to continue to exploit developing nations⁶.

There are alternatives, however, and it is worth considering the impact of some small choices on the lives of the workers who produce these goods. Choosing products sourced from fair trade systems or micro-enterprises empowers whole families and communities to seek a better quality of life, to engage with education and to make choices that will break the cycle of poverty and slavery⁷.

Even beading on wedding dresses should be considered - generally beautiful and complex beading is produced in sweatshops in Southeast Asia and China, and then shipped to Australia. Micro-enterprises ensure that women are paid a commensurate proportion of the income from the long hours put into the delicate hand craft. Succinctly put by the founder of ethicalweddings.com, brides should have 'a day that's meant to be about celebrating and joy ...[rather than] wearing a dress that caused someone else's suffering The Guardian, Saturday May 5, 2007.'

Making fair trade choices in wedding planning is, then, an important consideration for a Christian in seeking freedom from oppression around the world.

Acting justly. Footprints in the ... dust?

The statistics are staggering. The average wedding, with 100 guests, will produce a carbon footprint of 37 tonnes of greenhouse gas⁸. The one day event will produce tonnes of waste products, including wasted food products, gift wrapping and packaging materials, decorations,

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wage_slavery

⁷ <http://www.fairtrade.com.au/producer-info/producer-impact>

⁸ <http://www.todae.com.au/Products/mylifecarbonoffsets/myweddingmediumcarbonoffsetwasterecycling/>

and paper materials such as invitations and order of ceremony cards, not to mention the carbon and waste produced in the manufacture of these quickly discarded items.

Some of the plastic items that will be discarded at the end of the event will take a thousand years at least to begin to break down in landfill⁹.

Wedding footprints are about considering small choices that will have a significant impact on the environment.

Choosing locally grown and in-season flowers will save the wedding budget a sizable chunk of money, but also will alleviate the carbon debt of creating a false growing environment, or shipping flowers in from overseas.

Considering your footprint also means considering the value of some traditions. Many families traditionally produce, and *expect*, formal wedding invitations, gift registry card and RSVP card to be sent out to guests. The green, or ethical wedding movement advocates the use of new media to reduce the carbon footprint of using paper based disposable products. Issuing beautifully designed invitations by email and using a reputable online wedding gift registry will reduce the 'paper print', and a minimal production of paper invitations, carefully considered to use recycled and wisely sourced paper products, will keep everyone happy.

Similarly, choosing a venue that supports local produce, or even meat-free cuisine¹⁰, for the day will further reduce the carbon debt created by the festivities.

⁹ http://greenliving.lovetoknow.com/What_Will_Happen_if_You_Do_Not_Recycle_Plastic

¹⁰ To produce 1 kilogram of beef produces 22 kilograms of CO2 emissions, and requires 17m2 of natural habitat (per kilo) (<http://www.appropedia.org/Beef>)

Choose your symbols wisely - love or oppression?

A wedding day is full of symbols, but not all of the symbols are understood to mean what they originally did. The typical, traditional ‘white wedding’ that is aspired to by so many women is full of representations that are vastly different to the ‘princess for a day’ fantasy. While the white dress is understood to represent the innocence of the bride¹¹, the filmy veil traditionally represented the subordination of the woman to her husband¹² with the lifting of the veil being symbolic of his taking possession of her. The rings represent the commitment made by the couple to each other.

Many of the symbols at a wedding are remnants of a time long past. Committing to a thoughtful approach to planning a wedding should include a discussion of the implications of the traditions that are so readily adopted. It is a thoughtful approach to deconstruct some of these traditions, find the core value, and then re-represent that value in a contextually relevant way.

For example, the tradition of being ‘given away’ is reminiscent of the tradition of chattel changing hands. In days long gone, the women were seen as property of the father, to be sold or traded as he saw fit¹³. Being physically given away ensured that the bride made it ‘to the altar’. Still used today, symbolically, this still places the bride as someone else’s responsibility. Interestingly, the Biblical example is that a *man* shall leave his parents and cleave to his wife (Gen 2:24). The appropriate response for a Christian is to define the core value of the tradition and to re-shape culture appropriately. In this instance, it might be appropriate for both the bride and the groom to leave their families and join together to walk

¹¹ The cultural perception is that a white dress symbolizes bridal innocence – however, the white dress was a tradition that began in the late 1800s by Queen Victoria, who wanted to incorporate some lace into her wedding dress. Christian tradition, however, maintains, even if subtly, the understanding that white weddings are for virgins only (<http://www.zimbio.com/Wedding+Dresses/articles/10/Why+Does+the+Bride+Wear+White>)

¹² http://www.ourmarriage.com/html/why_does_the_bride_wear_a_veil.html

¹³ <http://www.articlesbase.com/women's-issues-articles/wedding-traditions-giving-away-the-bride-88916.html>

up the aisle, representing their journeys away from their families into life together.

Other traditions, like the carrying of bouquets by the bridal party, have grown from a situational necessity - in medieval times, brides began to carry bouquets as the smell of the blooms was intended to cover up the smell of the bride and to make her sweet-smelling to her new groom¹⁴. This tradition, when evaluated for core value, appears to have none. It is therefore appropriate for the bridal couple to evaluate whether bridal flowers justify the expense.

Another consideration is the rings. Beautiful symbols of the commitment shared by the bridal couple, most cultures that observe the exchange of rings have a touching origin story. In the 'old times', it was understood that the ring finger contains a blood vessel that travels directly to the heart – the left hand being slightly closer to the heart than the right - and wearing a ring around it symbolised the binding of the heart to another.

It is worth, however, checking the origins of your gold and diamond wedding and engagement rings. Conflict, or blood, diamonds are mined under the most brutal of circumstances. Thanks to the Kimberley process, less than 1% of diamonds available on the Western market has come from a conflict situation¹⁵. Significantly, this does not make the diamonds from other sources clean - the process of exploring for and mining diamonds damages, usually irreparably, the natural environment and the local wildlife¹⁶.

Similarly, the average wedding ring weighs just 10 grams but produces around 3 tonnes of toxic waste during its mining and refining process¹⁷. Whilst global sales of ethically produced

¹⁴ http://www.ehow.com/facts_5268642_do-brides-carry-flowers.html

¹⁵ <http://www.kimberleyprocess.com>

¹⁶ <http://www.miningwatch.ca/en/there-are-no-clean-diamonds-what-you-need-know-about-canadian-diamonds>

¹⁷ The Age, January 9, 2008 – “A fairer world at your fingertips”.

gold account for less than 1% of the \$56 billion gold jewellery market, the ‘green’ gold market sees miners in affiliated ‘green’ mines receive 10% over the wages of their peers and the demand is growing.

In a practical sense, approaching wedding jewellery ethically opens two main options – choosing recycled, whether that is buying a pre-loved ring, or purchasing from a bespoke provider who recycles gold and jewels into new pieces; or purchasing from an accredited source. With the rise in awareness of clean and guilt-free options in the gold and diamond market, clear-conscience purchasing requires minimal research and results in a guilt-free symbol – the beauty of the gift can only be amplified knowing that its production has not put people through hardship.

Financial responsibility - The price of ‘walking humbly’

The average Australian wedding costs between \$25,000 and \$50,000. Financially, the burden of getting married places a strain on the immediate family of the bridal couple, and on the already unstable global economy. The list of ‘must-haves’ is pretty extensive: bonbonniere for a 200 person reception can easily cost \$2,000! Flowers can cost thousands of dollars. Bridal ‘preparation’ includes pre-wedding hair and skin care, tanning, weight management, nails, on-the-day hair and makeup as well as the dress, bridal underwear, shoes, stockings, veil...

Many weddings place either the family or the couple themselves into debt¹⁸. Viewing this specific issue through the theological lens mentioned earlier, it is appropriate for Christians to ask themselves whether this degree of expense and extravagance is appropriate.

Many of the “budget” weddings featured on ethicalweddings.co.uk cost around \$15,000 with

¹⁸ <http://www.news.com.au/embracing-debt-in-the-name-of-love/story-0-1111118071321>

many costing far less, the pertinent question is whether it is an appropriate use of resources to spend at least \$10,000 more than that.

Walking humbly with God is a mindset that is undoubtedly challenging for many brides. Taught from childhood that their wedding day is the only day of their life where they will be a princess, taught to expect the lavish attention, it is challenging to re-evaluate whether it is appropriate. In Old Testament covenantal relationships, the utmost solemnity was sought. In covenant, “certain aspects of the relationship (eternal and universal) of God to humanity are made manifest (Stackhouse. 1997:145).” Biblically, the focus was on God during the formation of a covenant, not on one party or the other. In a wedding, the covenant celebrates the love between two people and brings the grace of God, who gave the love, and who’s love for His people is made manifest in the allegory of a wedding (Somerville. 1997:1).

Conclusion

Developing a post-modern ethic of *anything* is difficult. By its very nature, producing a definitive treatise on the appropriate behaviour for anyone is counter to the heart of the post-modern paradigm. Consequently, this essay has not produced a neatly defined ethic of weddings. It has, however, raised a series of questions and asked Christian couples to evaluate the cultural glasses through which they are viewing their wedding.

This essay has covered the ethical implications of some of the more common wedding traditions and challenged engaged couples to think about the implicit symbolism they are using in their wedding day.

This essay has also discussed the implications of making choices that are in line with the core

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Christian ethical values that were defined as ‘thoughtful’ ethics – to act justly, love mercy, walk humbly, and desire to see freedom for the oppressed and prisoners.

The outcome of this is that, having had their values challenged, and being more informed, couples can make decisions concerning their wedding that provide them with the greatest amount of satisfaction in the integrity of their choices in line with their personal values.

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