

The Significance of the Wedding Ceremony

By Mary Fairchild

Christian marriage is a covenant relationship, not a contract. For this reason, we see symbols of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 within many of the common wedding traditions of today.

Before we were married, the minister who officiated at our wedding sat down with us and explained the significance of several wedding ceremony traditions associated with the Old Testament blood covenant. As a couple, this knowledge deepened our appreciation for each wedding tradition, intensified the experience of worship in our wedding ceremony, and gave us a clearer understanding of our physical and spiritual union.

Easton's Bible Dictionary explains that the Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*, which comes from the root meaning "to cut." A blood covenant was a formal, solemn, and binding agreement—a vow or pledge—between two parties made by "cutting" or dividing of animals into two parts. As we look further into the details of a covenant, we'll consider the significance of various wedding traditions.

In Genesis 15:9-10, the blood covenant began with the sacrifice of animals. After splitting them precisely in half, the animal halves were arranged opposite each other on the ground, leaving a pathway between them. The two parties making the covenant would walk from either end of the path, meeting in the middle.

The meeting ground between the animal pieces was regarded as holy ground. There the two individuals would cut the palms of their right hands and then join these hands together as they mutually pledged a vow, promising all of their rights, possessions, and benefits to the other. Next, the two would exchange their belt and outer coat, and in so doing, take some part of the other person's name.

Now we'll begin to observe some of the covenant symbols in Christian wedding traditions:

Seating of the Family on Opposite Sides of the Church

Family and friends of the bride and groom are seated on opposite sides of the church to symbolize the cutting of the blood covenant. These witnesses—the family, friends, and invited guests—are all participants in the wedding covenant, and many of them have made sacrifices to help prepare the couple for marriage and to support them in their holy union.

Center Aisle and White Runner

The center aisle represents the meeting ground, or the pathway between the animal pieces where the blood covenant is established. The white runner symbolizes holy ground where two lives are joined as one by God. (Exodus 3:5, Matthew 19:6)

Seating of the Parents

In Bible times, the parents of the bride and groom were ultimately responsible for discerning God's will concerning the choice of a spouse for their children. The wedding tradition of seating the parents in a place of prominence is meant to recognize their responsibility for the couple's union.

Groom Enters First

Ephesians 5:23-32 reveals that earthly marriages are a picture of the church's union with Christ. God initiated the relationship through Christ, who called and came for his bride, the church. Christ is the Groom, who established the blood covenant first initiated by God. For this reason, the groom enters the church auditorium first.

Father Escorts and Gives Away the Bride

In Jewish tradition, it was the father's duty to present his daughter in marriage as a pure virgin bride. As parents, the father and his wife also took responsibility for endorsing their daughter's choice in a husband. By escorting her down the aisle, a father says, "I have done my very best to present you, my daughter, as a pure bride. I approve of this man as your choice for a husband, and now I bring you to him." When the ministers asks, "Who gives this woman?," the father responds, "Her mother and I." This giving away of the bride, demonstrates the parent's blessing on the union and the transfer of care and responsibility to the husband.

White Wedding Dress

The white wedding dress has a two-fold significance. It is a symbol of the wife's purity in heart and life, and in reverence to God. It's also a picture of the righteousness of Christ described in Revelation 19:7-8. Christ clothes his bride, the church, in his own righteousness as a garment of "fine linen, bright and clean."

Joining Right Hands

As we saw in the blood covenant, the two individuals would join together the bleeding palms of their right hands. As their blood mixed, they would exchange a vow, forever promising all of their rights and resources to the other. In a wedding, as the bride and groom face one another to say their vows, they join right hands and publicly commit everything they are, and everything they possess, in a covenant relationship. They leave their families, forsake all others, and become one with their spouse.

Exchanging of the Rings

While the wedding ring is an outward symbol of the couple's inward bond, illustrating with an unending circle the eternal quality of love, it signifies so much more in light of the blood covenant. A ring was used as a seal of authority. When pressed into hot wax, the impression of the ring left an official seal on legal documents. Therefore, when the couple wears a wedding ring, they demonstrate their submission to God's authority over their marriage. The couple recognizes that God brought them together and that he is intricately involved in every part of their covenant relationship.

A ring also represents resources. When the couple exchanges wedding rings, it symbolizes the giving of all their resources—their wealth, possessions, talents, and emotions—to the other in marriage. Remember, in the blood covenant, the two parties exchanged belts, which form a circle when worn. Thus, the exchanging of the rings is another sign of their covenant relationship. Similarly, God chose a tainbow, which forms a circle, as a sign of his covenant with Noah. (Genesis 9:12-16)

Bridal Veil

Not only does the bridal veil show the modesty and purity of the bride and her reverence for God, it reminds us of the Temple veil which was torn in two when Christ died on the cross. The removing of the veil took away the separation between God and man, giving believers access into the very presence of God. Since Christian marriage is a picture of the union between Christ and the church, we see another reflection of this relationship in the removal of the bridal veil. Through marriage, the couple now has full access to one another. (1 Corinthians 7:4)

Pronouncement of Husband and Wife

The pronouncement officially declares that the bride and groom are now husband and wife. This moment establishes the exact beginning of their covenant. The two are now one in the eyes of God.

Presentation of the Couple

When the minister introduces the couple to the wedding guests, he is drawing attention to their new identity and the name change brought about through the marriage. Similarly, in the blood covenant, the two parties would exchange some part of their names. In Genesis 15, God gave Abram a new name, Abraham, by adding letters from his own name, Yahweh.

The Reception

A ceremonial meal was often a part of the blood covenant. At a wedding reception, guests are invited to share with the couple in the blessings of the covenant. The reception also illustrates the wedding supper of the Lamb described in Revelation 19.

Cutting and Feeding of the Cake

The cutting of the cake is another picture of the cutting of the covenant. When the bride and groom take pieces of the cake and feed it to each other, once again, they are showing how they have given their all to one another, and will care for the other as one flesh. At a Christian wedding, the cutting and feeding of the cake can be done joyfully, but should also be done lovingly and reverently, in a way that honors the covenant relationship.

Throwing of Rice

The rice throwing tradition at weddings originated with the throwing of seed. It was meant to remind couples of one of the primary purposes in marriage—to create a family that will serve and honor the Lord. Therefore, guests symbolically throw rice as a gesture of blessing for the spiritual and physical fruitfulness of the marriage.

Many Christian couples don't fully understand their wedding ceremony as a holy act of worship, nor do they realize the solemnness of their oath or the expressions of reverence that are represented by Christian wedding customs and traditions. By learning the biblical significance of today's wedding customs, your special day is certain to be more meaningful.