

Seven Requisites for Getting Married at Grace Church

INTRODUCTION

Several children were asked some questions about marriage. One question was, “How do you decide who to marry?” Alan, age 10, said, “You have to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like, if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dip coming.” Kirsten, age 10, said, “No person really decides before they grow up who they’re going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you’re stuck with.”

The same question comes to pastors many times a year, “How do you decide who to marry?” It may sound strange to some that the question would even come up. Isn’t a pastor supposed to marry anyone who asks?

When a pastor takes his vows of ordination, he vows to teach and preach the Word of God as well as to abide by the Bible in the life of the church. Marriage is regulated by God in the Scriptures. Pastors are bound to uphold those regulations. They will give an account to God.

In all honesty, some of the marital regulations in Scripture are variously interpreted. These various interpretations are espoused by godly people. A pastor must add another dimension to the diversity of interpretations—his convictions and conscience. As pastors minister, they must violate neither Scripture nor conscience.

After thoroughgoing discussions by the Pastoral Staff and Elders at Grace, there is agreement that the staff will be pleased to marry couples per the following requisites. If a couple cannot agree to these requisites, they will not be married at Grace. If a pastor declines to marry a couple because they have not met one or more of the first six requisites, no other staff pastor will do the wedding and the wedding cannot occur at Grace. (Requisite #7 involves a degree of flexibility.)

If a couple does not agree with the requisites, the pastor involved will encourage them to prayerfully consider the ones of disagreement and make the appropriate adjustments to comply. Sometimes the couple needs time to think them over. They will then get back to the pastor they met with within a week. If the couple doesn’t come to agreement, the pastor will decline the wedding. Yet he will not sit in judgment of the couple and they are welcome to attend Grace. Every couple who wants to be married at Grace is presented the same set of requisites. No favoritism is ever played so that some couples can get around the requisites. They are equally applied. Some of the requisites can cause discomfort and awkwardness because of the sensitive nature of the requisite. Yet all of the requisites have Scriptural and practical reasons. Over the years, those who have complied with the requisites have never come back and complained that the requisites caused marital problems. But some who were not willing to meet the requisites have lived to regret it.

Those interested in getting married will have an initial meeting with the pastor they would like to perform the wedding. These requisites will be the substance of the meeting. If a couple agrees to all seven in the integrity of their hearts, the wedding can proceed and the foundations of a good marriage have been laid.

THE SEVEN REQUISITES

Marriage is the oldest human institution ordained by God. It is a joyful, serious, difficult, fulfilling, and permanent estate not to be entered into by any lightly. In order to lift up the sacred and important nature of marriage, Grace embraces the following seven (7) requirements for getting married in the church:

REQUISITE # 1

At least one of the couple must regularly attend Grace Church.

Marrying couples is part of the shepherding ministry of the church. The pastors want to personally know those they marry. They want to shepherd them. They want to continue in a post-marriage relationship with the couple. Pastors want to be available for the joys as well as the struggles of the couples down the road. District justices are available to marry people they have never met or will see again.

It is ideal if both people of the couple attend Grace. But often one of the couple is from outside the geographic area or there are other circumstances that prevent attendance at Grace. Pastors will marry based on the relationship of at least one, assuming a relationship with both will evolve in the wedding process.

For local couples, this requisite is also a standard by which a couple establishes a spiritual priority early in their marriage. They agree to attend church on a regular basis for spiritual enrichment and fellowship. They also understand that regular corporate worship puts them in a good place should they have children.

REQUISITE #2

The couple must complete pre-marital counseling before the wedding.

Prevention is better than the cure. Premarital counseling is designed to give insights into marriage, offer tools for doing marriage, and deal with issues and problems couples deal with—past, present, and future. In some ways, premarital counseling is like trying to teach someone to fly an airplane while sitting in the living room. Couples tend to idealize each other and marriage and tend not see some of the present and coming realities. For this reason, *post*-marital counseling within the first year of marriage, although not required, has merit.

Pre-marital counseling will include at least the following elements:

1. Planning the wedding.
2. Personality analysis.
3. Marital issues concerning finances, sexuality, family, communication, conflict resolution, unresolved former issues, etc.
4. Mentoring by another mature couple.

The pre-marital counseling process is more like a time exposure than a snapshot. Sufficient time must be allowed for the process, usually a minimum of eight weeks to three months. Grace uses both group counseling (pre-marital class) and individual counseling.

When one of the couple or both live out of town, the couple must provide verification that a premarital counseling program of a similar nature will take place. They will need to supply the name and contact information of the pastor or counselor that will oversee the process.

REQUISITE #3

Both persons must be of like spiritual natures.

The Bible is clear that people of faith in Christ must marry people of faith in Christ. The marriage of a Christian to a non-believer is forbidden (II Cor. 6:14-15). Therefore both persons must be born again.

This requisite is not about two people marrying people of like denomination. It's about both persons being born again believers. The ideal situation would be for a woman to be marrying a man who is at least as strong as or stronger spiritually than she is because the husband has the responsibility of spiritual leadership in the home.

If two unbelievers (churched or un-churched) request marriage, a wedding may be possible after the counseling process if both remain unbelievers. The pastor involved will prayerfully make that decision. But if one comes to faith in Christ during the counseling process and the other one doesn't, the wedding can not occur at Grace. It would be a mixed marriage.

Further, the Bible does not see marriage as an evangelism tool or a reason to violate the commands of God. Some Christians believe that they can win their fiancé to Christ once they marry. That's possible but rare. These good intentions will not be sufficient to persuade a pastor to do the wedding of a mixed faith situation in violation of Scripture.

REQUISITE #4

Divorced persons must have scriptural grounds for remarriage.

Remarriage following a divorce is not a scripturally automatic scenario. The Bible regulates divorce as well as remarriage for Christians. If one or both of the parties has been divorced, the pastor will discuss the various Scriptural scenarios that allow for or prohibit remarriage. (Pastor Al has written a thorough treatment of the various cases in a booklet entitled "Biblical Divorce and Remarriage". Contact the church.)

The pastors are in complete agreement concerning the Biblical scenarios of remarriage. Basically, a pastor will not remarry a believer under any circumstance whose divorce did not occur as a result of a believing partner's adultery. If adultery was the cause of divorce, the circumstances must then be weighed against the teachings of Scripture concerning remarriage.

Regardless of the circumstances of one's divorce, when a couple decides to get married, they should not assume a pastor's position on their situation until they meet with him. The divorce and remarriage scenarios are complex. A couple's case may indeed qualify for a wedding at Grace. Perhaps it won't. The role of pastors is not just to marry, it is to give spiritual guidance. A session with a pastor about these matters could pay lifelong dividends.

Obviously, the issue of divorce and remarriage can be uncomfortable for both the couple and the pastor. Rehearsing the pertinent details of the past to establish whether there is compliance with the Scriptures may not be pleasant. Neither are the words of the pastor who may have to decline the invitation to marry the couple. It's important that all parties understand that the pastors are not making judgments about the couple. The pastors are abiding by what they believe the Scriptures teach and by their convictions. Each couple must be convinced before God as to the propriety of their remarriage.

If a pastor believes a couple is moving into sin by a remarriage, he will tell them. If a pastor cannot remarry the person, it isn't a message to the couple that they should no longer attend the church. The pastors work hard to minister in such a way that Christ will be formed in every person.

REQUISITE #5

Each person should have not only parental consent for the marriage, but parental blessing.

A great source of conflict in marriage is in-law related. People not only marry each other, in reality they marry families. It's best to marry on good terms. So it's good for those intending to get married to seek the consent of their parents (especially if they are still living at home). Parents have a great and vested interest in the well being of their children. They want them to marry well. So along with their consent should also be an endorsement that the parents are happy concerning their child's choice of mate.

If a parent cannot endorse the marriage or if they stand in opposition to the wedding, this situation must be addressed. The pastor will take the lead and actually involve the parents in the process. If the pastor considers the concerns of the parents to be substantive and appropriate, the pastor will likely decline the wedding. The principle at work is the leading of God comes through the instrumentality of the parents. If the pastor believes that the issues are a result of personal issues and unsubstantiated objections by the parents, the pastor may proceed with the wedding, having addressed both the couples and parents as to why.

In the case of older couples and those who are no longer closely associated with parental guidance or whose parents are deceased, this only becomes an issue if there are apparent problems that should be addressed concerning prospective in-laws. At any age, it's good to have the blessing of the parents.

REQUISITE #6

The couple must be living a life of sexual purity before marriage.

The Scriptures are clear that sexual purity is the will of God for believers (I Thes. 4:3-8). Romantic love is not a legitimate reason to violate God's standards. Couples who are having sex or living together (with or without sex) must agree to refrain from sex and to live in separate dwellings until the time of the wedding. The marrying pastor wants to be able to look the couple in the eyes on their wedding day and know that they are in the will of God and not lying about their Christian relationship and witness in front of the God and the wedding guests.

Many couples are engaging in sex before marriage. This is an awkward, but very teachable moment when the subject comes up in the interview. Couples are generally very honest about it. The pastor will explain God's will in the matter and they will be asked to refrain from sex with mutual accountability. What's more, they are encouraged to ask the forgiveness of God and each other. What the couple decides to do will set the course for their entire marriage.

This requisite is not something to satisfy a pastor; it's a step of obedience before the living God and each other that they will get married God's way. The grace of God in forgiveness and compliance is incredible if a couple will afford themselves of it. If a couple will not refrain from sex or live separately until the wedding day, the request for a wedding at Grace will be declined.

REQUISITE #7

The couple will exercise mature discretion concerning alcoholic beverages at the reception.

The pastors believe the best choice is in the abstaining of alcohol in wedding receptions. Alcohol is the social communion of the world. Christian couples who exalt Christ in the wedding ceremony should not be overtaken by the atmosphere of the world at the reception. They can declare their Christian distinctives from the very first day of their marriage to their relatives, friends, neighbors, and associates. Beverages like champagne for a toast are permissible but not encouraged.

If there will be alcoholic beverages freely flowing or a cash bar at the reception, some staff pastors may decline the wedding due to the disparity of the spiritual atmosphere between the wedding and the reception. All pastors will decline a wedding without assurances that there will be a tips-trained person at the reception. (A tips-trained person is the leading dispenser of alcoholic beverages who will monitor levels of alcoholic consumption with a view to refusing beverages to those who appear to be approaching their limits.)

Each pastor will be clear with the couple as to where he stands on the issue of alcohol at receptions and therefore whether or not he will perform the ceremony. This is the one requisite in which another pastor may choose to accept the wedding if one pastor declines.

CONCLUSION

Marriage is a holy and high estate. But it is also fraught with the effects of sin and the curse of Genesis 3. One out of every two marriages ends in divorce. Of the marriages that remain, one out of two is substantially unhappy. The pastors at Grace want people to marry well. They also want to give responsible leadership in the area of marriage for the benefit of the couple as well as because they are answerable before God.

It is recommended that all couples thinking about getting married at Grace meet with a pastor. No couple should assume a pastor's response about weddings until this meeting. Amazing and good things can happen when couples, pastors, and requisites work hand in hand.

“What therefore God has joined together let no man divide.” Mt. 19:6

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