From Community to Consumers: The Wedding Industry's Impact on the Ritual and Theological Meaning of Mennonite Weddings

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Rituals deepen human understanding and aid movement through rites of passage and transition using symbols, symbolic acts, and symbolic language. However, many religious rituals have been greatly altered by globalization and the emergence of a consumer society. For example, births (baby dedications), marriages (weddings), and deaths (funerals) have been commodified in the consumer capitalist economy. In the process, the focus of these rituals has shifted away from religious meaning and identity formation within the context of the church to consumer-producer relationships. According to Rebecca Mead, staff writer for *The New Yorker* and author of *Billion Dollar Bride: How the American Wedding Industry Ran Off with the American Wedding*, the average American bride and groom together spend $22,000 dollars on their wedding day.[1] This has a significant impact on the ritual practice of the religious wedding and the theology of marriage it seeks to embody.

In this article I analyze the wedding industry's impact on the ritual function and theological meaning of weddings in North American Mennonite communities, specifically Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada), because, as a Mennonite, I want to promote wedding rituals that are consistent with Anabaptist-Mennonite biblical and theological commitments (e.g., understandings of covenant and marriage within the community of faith and the community's ethics) and that provide support for couples entering into marriage. While I draw on examples of weddings within MC Canada in order to ground my argument in a particular context and understanding of what it means to be Mennonite, my conclusions have implications for the wider Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

[1] Rebecca Mead, "You're Getting Married: The Wal-Martization of the Bridal Business," in *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, third ed., eds. Kieran Scott and Michael Warren (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 314-25.

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I will begin by analyzing the current capitalist consumer economy's effects on rituals in general. I will then explore the wedding industry's impact on religious wedding rituals in particular, and will reveal tensions between the values promoted by that industry and those of Anabaptist-Mennonites. I will outline criteria for Christian wedding rituals based on Anabaptist-Mennonite values as they pertain to theo-ethics. While such weddings may incorporate products from the wedding industry, they are first and foremost ecclesial practices integrally connected to the church's discipleship ethics.

The Capitalist Consumer Economy and Ritual Function

The word "ritual" carries a variety of meanings and characteristics. This article adopts a widely accepted definition of ritual as a repetitive act in which *symbol* (that which both speaks for itself and points to something else, as opposed to *signs*, which point only to something else),[2] symbolic action, and symbolic language come together.[3] Ritual has an inherent social function. Theologian Gerard Lukken asserts that "[a]s the self finds identity in and through ritual together with the other, so the members of a group or larger community, precisely as members of that group or community, find their identity in and through ritual."[4] Thus, rituals play an important role since "the community realizes itself in and through ritual."[5] Additionally, rituals are not static but change over time, "if only because the physical or social materials that are available in one period and one place often will not be available at a later time or different location."[6] Frequently these changes reflect shifts occurring in society at large.[7] It is important to pay attention to how rituals change, what causes the changes, and how these changes affect the meaning of ritual (identity formation of self and community) and its function (a repetitive act incorporating symbol, symbolic action, and symbolic language).

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[2] Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form, and Identity of Christian Ritual in our Culture* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), 46-47.
[3] Ibid., 39.
[4] Ibid., 70.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Wedding as Text: Communicating Cultural Identities through Ritual* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002), 28.
[7] Ibid.

At present, the prospects for rituals are mixed. On the one hand, there exists a "strong and positive foundation for authentic ritual."[8] Part of the positive foundation for the effective making of meaning through ritual is the shift to postmodernism, which questions our ability to know the truth.[9] It is now widely accepted in psychoanalytic circles, linguistics, semiotics, and contemporary philosophy that "we have no direct access whatsoever to truth or reality, and are always imprisoned in a network of mediators,"[10] such as language and other forms of communication. These mediators can disclose only a partial reality; they both reveal and obscure, and are constructed and culturally defined. As a result, reality will always remain other. As Lukken puts it, "There is a culturally determined symbolic order to which we are captive, and in and through which we must repeatedly and constantly discover and find our identity as human beings. . . . [T]hat symbolic order condenses intensively in ritual, so that it plays an essential role in giving meaning to life—both everyday life and its crucial moments."[11] In this way, postmodernism has created a space for ritual practice in society, as that which mediates reality, but also reveals the limitations of doing so, since the search for truth is particular or culturally determined.

On the other hand, the prospects for rituals that effectively point beyond themselves are negative as well, partly because "the symbolic order is under threat of being overrun, through its domination by the economic order."[12] One way that the economic system manifests itself and dominates ritual is through advertising. Advertisements approach people as consumers and urge them to acquire new objects in order to become happier.[13] In

[8] Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance,* 272.

[9] I am working with Lukken's definition, namely that postmodernism is "a phase in Western culture which casts doubt on belief in progress, the strength of human rationality, the authority of modern science, and on the great ideologies, including those of religions"; it "resists the manner of thinking in which all phenomena are ultimately traced back to one fundamental source, and stresses differences" (*Rituals in Abundance,* 234). While I demonstrate one positive aspect of postmodernism on rituals here, I also note the effect of globalization and the capitalist consumer economy throughout the article as another, more recent, phenomenon shaping Western culture.

[10] Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance,* 273.

[11] Ibid., 273-74.

[12] Ibid., 272.

[13] Ibid., 276.

some cases "the exchange value of the object is so strongly emphasized that merely its purchase alone would appear to bring satisfaction."[14] Objects function as products for purchase rather than symbols, which point both to themselves and beyond themselves. In advertising, meaning "opens only in the direction of the product to be acquired and possessed."[15] In the case of weddings, advertising presents the wedding dress, cake, etc. as desirable consumer products disguised as symbols pointing to romance, happiness, and prosperity, but which are in fact "desymbolising signs of [products] that the advertiser wants to sell us."[16] In order for a product to function symbolically as part of a ritual, it must be used by the participant as an element of a narrative that aids her in transitioning from one state to the liminal state, whereby she "passes over the threshold (Latin: *limen*) and enters a 'border situation,' leaving the zone of the strong structures of the social order"[17] to a new state in community. The advertising industry itself does not have the capacity to guarantee such a thing. Nor does it necessarily offer product narratives in line with the theo-ethical values of the consumer or of the community in which religious ritual takes place.

While the economic order threatens their function, rituals can retain their symbols, symbolic acts, and symbolic language in an age of consumerism—if given the right conditions and attitudes. For example, a relationship between ritual and economy that lays the ground work for ritual is possible, if ritual participants accept the market's ability to sell products that can be transformed into ritual symbols or if the product's focus is not on "having" but on "being."[18] Through a study of first-time brides currently living in the United States, qualitative data analyst Susanne Friese claims that the wedding dress, a consumer product, is significant as a symbolic ritual that is part of the bride's identity formation[19] and thus helps with

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 277.
[17] Ibid., 128.
[18] Ibid., 278.
[19] Identity formation is a key part of ritual. In the context of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, identity formation is linked to discipleship, at the heart of which is the goal of being formed into the likeness of Christ. Ecclesial practices play an important role in this process as they shape the character of the community of faith. Worship practices can thus become a lived

the transition into marriage. She discerns this by examining the meanings that brides attach to wedding attire and the "consumption practices used to extract these meanings."[20]

According to Friese, postmodern understandings recognize that consumption is not merely about creating things to be used but about creating things *of value* to be used. Consumer goods, then, are "signifiers that serve to create and construct desired self-identities through their symbolic properties."[21] Thus, the capitalist consumer economy, while it promotes "having" and consumption as ends in and of themselves, is not inherently a barrier to the revitalization of making meaning in rituals.

The choices that postmodern consumers make reflect their identities and their freedom to choose who they wish to become by way of what they purchase. In the case of the wedding dress, Friese determines that this product takes on a ritual/symbolic function through the process of selecting, purchasing, and wearing it, which helps the bride transition from one social location (single), through the liminal stage, and finally to another social location (married). The exchange value of the object is not emphasized in such a way that its purchase alone would appear to bring satisfaction (one of Lukken's criteria for distinguishing products as de-symbolising rather than symbolising[22]). Instead, it points to something beyond itself. Thus, the economy and the wedding industry can facilitate rituals that can function as such by offering consumer goods that convey various meanings and identities granting consumers the freedom to choose their own narrative. As Lukken frames it, there can be an economic foundation for ritual if participants are not attached to the economic perspective—that is, not completely controlled by outside commercial factors.[23]

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ethic. See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1992). On performative ritual participation in worship liturgy as it moves disciples from narrative to action, see Irma Fast Dueck, "The Performance of Worship and the Ordering of our Lives," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 79, no. 1 (January 2005): 51-67.

[20] Susanne Friese, "A Consumer Good in the Ritual Process: The Case of the Wedding Dress," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 47.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance,* 278-79.

[23] Ibid., 278.

In order to determine whether or not this is the case, Lukken asks the following questions: Are the predominant value patterns consumption, possession, results, and power—in short, "having"? Or are they patterns of integrity and integral experience of identity, of an experience of meaning that leaves things open, of value patterns such as mutual relationships, and commitment to a better society—in short, patterns that have more to do with "being"? If they are about consumption, is the consumption passive, merely about possessing an object?[24]

Lukken rightly argues that the predominant value patterns present in ritual, which its participants exhibit, help to determine its authenticity. With regard to the influence of the economy in particular, it is possible to determine ritual authenticity by discerning whether the predominant value promoted in purchasing a consumer good is "having" or "being." If a ritual is focused merely on consumption, then it cannot contain the symbols, symbolic acts, and symbolic language necessary in ritual practice. However, if it values consumption, but "there is evidence that it is not purely and simply a matter of possessing an object, but is at least as much if not more the experience and expression of a certain 'lifestyle,'" then it may be viewed positively as "an experience of the symbolic order" and, thus, authentic.[25] The remaining challenge is to ensure that consumption is not the driving force behind ritual meaning.

The relationship between the capitalist consumer-based economy and ritual is unavoidable and varied. In many ways the values of the economic system do not facilitate ritual and identity formation, but instead promote consumption for consumption's sake; objects that traditionally functioned as symbols in rituals are dominated by the economic system. This threatens the existence of authentic rituals. Friese shows that products can take on symbolic properties and aid in ritual processes (e.g., the wedding dress). While Lukken makes more tentative claims, he notes that consumptive tendencies can be part of a particular experience of the symbolic order. Opinions regarding conditions for authentic rituals are obviously mixed. While rituals can be enhanced by consumer products, the overwhelming risk is that consumerism will continue to dominate rituals negatively by shifting the focus from "being" to "having."

[24] Ibid., 278-79.
[25] Ibid., 279.

The Impact of the Wedding Industry on Weddings in MC Canada

Just as there is evidence that the economy has had an impact on rituals in general, there is evidence that the wedding industry has had an impact on religious wedding rituals in particular.[26] This is not surprising, given the close relationship between social institutions and changes in social life, which can have an effect on the theology and form of ecclesial practices. As feminist theologian Mary Hobgood aptly states: "[t]he social meanings given to sexuality [for example] (like those given to race, religion, culture, and all facets of capitalist life) are always in dialogue with economic arrangements."[27] Thus, in order to assess the ritual and theological health of Christian weddings in the material and ideological world of 21st-century capitalism, we need to assess how such weddings have been harnessed to the needs of capitalism.[28]

Most notably, the wedding industry contributes to the secularization and economization of religious wedding rituals. This is measured, for example, by the amount of money spent on weddings. Weddings have become opportunities for large-scale marketing campaigns, garnering the attention of religious and secular brides alike. The industry itself is worth between $40 billion to $100 billion per year.[29] As Mead states: "Bridal-industry sources like to point out that the amount spent on weddings is more than the national revenues of McDonald's and PepsiCo (in the United States); it is also far greater than the gross domestic product of, for example, the Bahamas ($5 billion) or Aruba ($2 billion) or many other island nations to whose beaches the newlyweds are likely to repair after the ceremony is over."[30] These numbers indicate that the wedding industry is having an enormous impact in dictating what couples ought to buy and how much

[26] A wedding can be understood as a ritual of transition or a rite of passage, which are related areas of study. What makes this so is that a wedding "marks a change in someone's life, from being a social individual to part of a new social group, a couple…marking a major change in status" (Leeds-Hurwitz, *Wedding as Text*, 26).

[27] Mary E. Hobgood, "Coming to Our Senses: Erotic and Economic Discipleship and the Transformation of Gender," in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice Love*, eds. Marvin Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 334.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Leeds-Hurwitz, *Wedding as Text*, 9.

[30] Mead, "You're Getting Married," 317.

they should spend in order to have "the perfect day."[31]

The wedding industry's narrative associates consumption with happiness and prosperity. If a couple buys the right dress, tuxedo, flowers, cake, and so on, their wedding will be more meaningful and joy-filled, and will promote an air of success and wealth to their friends and family, which is deemed desirable. Meaning, joy, and status are thus linked to physical appearances and displays of wealth. In this regard, Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz observes that "a display of wealth has become such an expected requirement that many families willingly go into debt to pay for the ceremony."[32]

The financial impact of the wedding industry and its emphasis on consumption is evident in the experiences of Mennonites in MC Canada. In recent years, contributors to the *Canadian Mennonite* magazine have reflected on changes in wedding rituals. In "Christian Values Shape Wedding Plans," Sherri and James Martin-Carman articulate their "disappointment that even Christian weddings have become more elaborate and expensive."[33] They observe that "the first decision is often booking the right hall a year or two in advance of the wedding and filling all the engagement time with frenzied planning: wardrobe, reception, dinner, dance, music, flowers, decorations, gift registry, guest list, invitations, photographer, parties, honeymoon. Finally, almost as an afterthought, a quick visit with the pastor takes care of the ceremony itself."[34] In "Throwing a Mennonite Wedding," Susanne Guenther Loewen claims that "many Mennonite weddings these

[31] The myth of the perfect wedding is a particularly dangerous narrative. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley relate how fairy-tale expectations separate those getting married from the human stories that each brings to the relationship, as well as from the Divine narrative as it intertwines with their own. Myths of perfection have theological implications. The question, "How is God an active partner in forming the marriage covenant?" is irrelevant when perfection, something that can be achieved apart from the Divine, is taken as a realistic goal. Revitalizing the wedding ritual in the Christian context thus means emphasizing the importance of personal, familial, ecclesial, and divine narratives as they pertain to the wedding and marriage of a couple, and deconstructing the narrative of perfection. See Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 76.

[32] Leeds-Hurwitz, *Wedding as Text,* 9.

[33] Ferne Burkhart, "Christian Values Shape Wedding Plans," *Canadian Mennonite*, September 3, 2007, 19.

[34] Ibid.

days are not much less extravagant than their secular counterparts, meaning that when it comes to weddings, that sensible Mennonite thriftiness seems to be going out of style."[35] And Rachel Bergen laments that many weddings "include diamond engagement rings, expensive wedding gowns, the bride being given away, extraordinarily expensive flowers and cakes, and spending way beyond one's means in order to celebrate a lifelong commitment."[36] Bergen offers two examples of Mennonite couples who chose to orient their weddings around different values.[37]

Historically, Mennonite weddings were not always a lavish affair. Historian Marlene Epp notes that prior to the 1920s and the professionalization of the wedding industry, Mennonite weddings were held in homes and required the support of the community for food preparation, passing along a single handwritten invitation from household to household, and cleaning and decorating the property.[38] However, as the industry developed, Mennonite weddings also modernized, becoming more costly and more extravagant. In addition, their communal character diminished. More work fell to the bride's mother, "who became responsible for organizing all the food preparation, or, in some cases, preparing everything herself or giving direction to the church's catering group."[39] In addition, popular

[35] Susanne Guenther Loewen, "Throwing a Mennonite Wedding," *Canadian Mennonite*: *Young Voices*, June, 15, 2011. youngvoices.canadianmennonite.org/blog/susieguentherloewen/throwingmennonitewedding, accessed November 26, 2014.

[36] Rachel Bergen, "A Marriage is More Than a Wedding," *Canadian Mennonite: Young Voices*, 2010. youngvoices.canadianmennonite.org/articles/marriagemorewedding, accessed November 26, 2014.

[37] Ibid. The Loewens used homemade or second-hand clothing for their wedding, had a post-ceremony chili potluck at their church, and gave each other simple wedding bands without diamonds. The Thorpes gave almost 80 percent of their guests a role in the wedding, and made the wedding dress a matter of prayer, trusting that something would come along instead of seeking out a designer gown—which it did, fifteen days prior to the event.

[38] Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2008), 68.

[39] Ibid., 69. There is disagreement over whether the growth of the wedding industry in 20th-century North America increased or decreased the work of women in MC Canada, who were always heavily involved in wedding planning. While Epp argues the industry increased women's work, Pamela Klassen contends it decreased their work, since items such as food, clothes, and decorations could be purchased rather than made from scratch, thus lessening the time and energy needed to produce these things. See Pamela Klassen, "Practicing

wedding culture began to dictate new ideals for the perfect wedding and the corresponding products. Thus, says Epp, "From the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, weddings underwent a cultural transformation from a home-based community event that was nevertheless primarily a religious union, to a church-based but commercialized reflection of popular culture."[40]

An emphasis on consumption as the key to happiness is theologically problematic for the religious wedding ritual among Mennonites, broadly speaking. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is a particularly formative text. There Jesus lifts up the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers as blessed. The text also promotes loving one's enemies, taking care of the poor, and placing hope and trust in God rather than in material possessions. None of these teachings values money or associates consumption with happiness. They imply the opposite: money and status can be in tension with the values of the Kingdom of God. Thus, for Mennonites, for whom the Sermon on the Mount is particularly normative, wedding rituals ought to embody values of peace and justice for the poor rather than wealth and status.

Another characteristic of the wedding industry that has altered the wedding ritual and led to its secularization is its emphasis on the individual rather than the community. The industry's target audience is the bride. As Mead states, "The bride-to-be, whose initial ignorance of what her nuptial role entails is matched only by her anxiety that she play it to perfection, is one of the most assiduously courted customers in America."[41] With the wedding dress as the most important purchase the bridal consumer makes, it is perhaps not surprising that "the romance that the retailer is most interested in promoting is not the one between bride and groom but that between bride and gown."[42] Brides are bombarded with ads featuring products they "must

Conflict: Weddings as Sites of Contest and Compromise," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 2 (1998): 228. These different findings suggest that Mennonite women in Canada and the US experienced the industry's growth in various ways, and caution against taking particular experiences as normative.

[40] Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 66.

[41] Mead, "You're Getting Married," 316.

[42] Ibid., 318. The language of "bride and groom" also reveals the heteronormativity of the wedding industry in North America, which does not adequately incorporate the diverse nature of wedding participants in Canada and the US where same-sex marriage is legal.

have" in order to experience joy on their wedding day. As previously noted, the common marketing technique that associates feelings and identities with purchases has a negative effect on the function of rituals to point both to themselves and beyond themselves.

While consumer products claim to promise happiness, romance, and love, they are incapable of doing so by their purchase alone, and are only products disguised as symbols. These products easily distract from central aspects of the religious wedding ritual not associated with the industry, such as relationships. Further, this characterization of the bride and the role she should play as a "princess" in a story narrated by the industry reinforces patriarchal gender roles as opposed to what it means to be created in the image of God, in relationships of mutuality and reciprocity.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas emphasizes "loving relationality" as the essential characteristic of being created in the image of God, and thus the defining characteristic of Christian marriage.[43] Loving relationality is modeled by the relational nature of God, who is *trinitas* and models mutuality and reciprocity. It is also modeled by Jesus and his relationships with the outcasts and marginalized.[44] Douglas thus offers a guiding principle for Christian weddings that align with lives lived in Christ.

As the articles from *Canadian Mennonite* indicate, the wedding industry's emphasis on the bride is reflected in Mennonite weddings where the role of the church and the couple's relationship together in Christ is diminished in light of the bride and her wishes or the "perfect" venue, cake, dress, church, and so on. This shift from community to individual is in tension with theological understandings of marriage in which the community of faith plays a key role. According to Article 19 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Christian marriage is "a mutual relationship in

Hobgood attributes this heteronormativity to "the capitalist goals of limitless profit making and managerial control" which "require and reproduce a system of gender polarization in order to function adequately." Gender polarization benefits the economy, since a sexual division of labor and unshared power increases profits in a hierarchical system (Hobgood, "Coming to Our Senses," 335).

[43] Kelly Brown Douglas, "Contested Marriage/Loving Relationality," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection,* 2nd ed., eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010): 380-89.

[44] Ibid., 383.

Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church."[45] Additionally, "The church is called to help couples strengthen their marriage relationship and to encourage reconciliation in times of conflict. The church is also to minister with truth and compassion to persons in difficult family relationships. As the family of God, the church is called to be a sanctuary offering hope and healing for families."[46] According to these confessional statements, marriage is inherently linked to the community of faith. The role of the community is to support the couple as they make the transition from single to married, and throughout the challenges they face in the course of their lives together. Weddings are to be structured so that the covenantal relationship between the couple in Christ, supported and witnessed by the community, is central to the ritual. The predominant values are covenant and community, and they shape the identities of the people transitioning from singleness into marriage.

Weddings: Ideas and Resources from Mennonite Church Canada, a resource for MC Canada pastors, further supports this emphasis in Mennonite theology.[47] Its articulation of a theology of Christian marriage, which incorporates an understanding of weddings as worship, reiterates the significance of the community of faith and God's blessing in the wedding ritual. The document stresses the ritual's value as an outward sign of what God is doing both outwardly and inwardly, that it is God who joins the couple, that marriage is a context for discipleship, that a wedding/marriage is an opportunity to participate in God's new creation, and that it ought to embody hospitality.[48] While this resource does not explore these themes in detail, its emphasis on the wedding covenant as triangular (couple, God, community of faith) and the wedding as a worship service—in which God is thanked for the couple's love for each other, asked to bless the wedding vows, and the congregation pledges to support the couple—is particularly valuable.[49] It offers a countercultural narrative to the wedding industry's

[45] General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).
[46] Ibid.
[47] Karen Martin Zimmerly, ed., *Weddings: Ideas and Resources from Mennonite Church Canada* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Church Canada, 2004).
[48] Ibid., 7-8.
[49] Ibid.

focus on the bride, and should continue to be a resource for those planning weddings in MC Canada. That said, because it was published prior to the beginning of MC Canada's "Being a Faithful Church" process, it does not engage the ongoing conversation about potential changes to the church's theology of marriage.[50] Current resources on weddings and marriage in MC Canada will need to engage these theological conversations and consider their implications.

The Anabaptist principle of *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness) also makes the community central to Anabaptist theology and spirituality. Early Anabaptists believed that human beings respond to God's call by yielding "inwardly to the Spirit of God, outwardly to the community and to outward discipline, and finally, in the face of a hostile world, believers might have to "yield" by accepting a martyr's death."[51] The individual and the community, as well as notions of "being" and "doing," are integrally related.[52] *Gelassenheit* is thus an element of a wedding ritual that flows from the Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology and resists the wedding industry's emphasis on consumerism and the individual.

The tensions between the industry's values and those of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology are also revealed in an understanding of ecclesiology as ethics. Anabaptist-Mennonite approaches to ethics claim that ecclesial

[50] The "Being a Faithful Church" process is a multi-year effort to "strengthen [the church's] capacity as a church to discern the will of God through the church's efforts to interpret the Bible for our time," paying particular attention to matters concerning sexuality. Mennonite Church Canada is currently engaging Part 6 of the process titled "Unity, Christ's Love, and Faithfulness in Discerning Matters of Sexuality," which considers same-sex committed relationships. The entire process is intended to be completed in 2016. Feedback from Part 5, "Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality," found that a "significant majority of responses [of congregations] reflect the historical affirmations as implied in the 'Resolution on Human Sexuality' (1986 & 1987) or Article 19 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995). At the same time, responses express a desire to be more compassionate and welcoming of those individuals who are same-sex attracted" (1). General Board Mennonite Church Canada, "Being a Faithful Church 6: Unity, Christ's Love, and Faithfulness in Discerning Matters of Sexuality" (Winnipeg: Mennonite Church Canada, 2014), www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/19849/BFC-Book.pdf, accessed July 15, 2015.

[51] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 152. The communal dimension of Anabaptism is also apparent in the ritual practices of baptism, the Lord's Supper, discipline, and economic sharing.

[52] Ibid.

practices are political as they form disciples of Christ in ways that model the ethics of the Kingdom of God. It is thus important to consider how the wedding ritual functions as something that flows from a life in Christ and an understanding of what it means to be "the church."

Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Howard Yoder, Anthony G. Siegrist offers a helpful articulation of the nature of ecclesial practices and their relationship with the divine that has implications for the Christian wedding ritual. He proposes that "contemporary Anabaptist theology should affirm that God acts through the church and that people encounter God through the lives of congregations as these communities continue to respond to Jesus Christ in worship and the training of those apprenticed in his way of life," which reflects the "dynamics of God's use of the church as primary locus of his presence and work in the world."[53] With specific regard to believer's baptism, he reiterates that "the practical thrust of the gospel is enacted in the church's practices, which not only signify the good news, but participate in it."[54]

While weddings, and in turn marriage, are not uniquely ordained by Jesus for the community of believers, like baptism and communion,[55] they are occasions to demonstrate the social character of the Christian community as an extension of life in Christ. The theological meaning of weddings for Anabaptist-Mennonites depends on their ability to demonstrate an alternative cultural vision of what it means to be "married" and to be the church in the world. To be formed into the character of Jesus with regard to the wedding ritual means to embody the commitments in the Sermon on the Mount and to foster loving relationality as demonstrated by the Divine. Weddings can also demonstrate an alternative vision of what it means to be church in the world, by inviting the congregation to be involved and to participate in ways that are subversive and revolutionary in the eyes of the wedding industry.

The biblical and theological understanding of "covenant relationship" can make weddings and marriages "be the church" in the world. The

[53] Anthony G. Siegrist, *Participating Witness: An Anabaptist Theology of Baptism and the Sacramental Character of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 65.
[54] Ibid., 64.
[55] Ibid., 79.

language of covenant is "the basic scriptural and theological category that defines the relationship, according to which God chooses to be the God of Israel" and in Christ in whom God extends covenant relationship to both Jews and Gentiles.[56] In this relationship God's promise to God's people is met in return with their promise to be God's people, which also reflects the relational nature of the Trinity.[57] Understanding marriage as covenant, and the wedding as a ritual marking a transition to covenant relationship between the couple and the Divine, runs counter to both the wedding industry's emphasis on short-term gratification based on consumption and its romantic narratives touting perfection as a norm. Promises made in a covenant, viewed biblically, are long-term and acknowledge the hard work involved in maintaining such a commitment. Understanding marriage as covenant reflects this commitment—the realization that marriage requires work and the support of the community of faith—as well as the importance of the couple's relationship to each other and to the Divine.

In sum, the wedding industry in the capitalist consumer-based economy promotes the following values that are in tension with Mennonite theology: 1) consumption and financial status over yieldedness to God, which includes commitment to the poor, 2) individual (i.e., bride) over community, and 3) the couple's relationship to each other as unrelated to, or more significant than, their relationship in Christ. From a Christian perspective, the industry is an example of the fallen structures of power in creation. Thus it is not surprising that it does not embody the values of the gospel. Nor should it necessarily. The church, which embodies a different way of being and commitment, is called to resist the industry and to offer a countercultural alternative. To live in Christ is to commit to embodying the character of Jesus, and to value covenant, individual, and community, the interconnection of human narratives and the divine narrative, and biblical notions of love shown in relationships of mutuality. Weddings, as part of the church's lived ethic, are occasions to embody the character of Jesus.

[56] Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 10.
[57] Ibid., 11.

Criteria for Anabaptist-Mennonite Weddings

Differences between the wedding industry's values and those of the Gospel indicate that an Anabaptist-Mennonite vision for meaningful wedding rituals must come from elsewhere. The Sermon on the Mount offers one potential source for such a vision. Drawing on Matthew 5-7, biblical understandings of covenant and loving relationality, the history of the wedding ritual in the Mennonite tradition, as well as from the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, *Weddings: Ideas and Resources from Mennonite Church Canada*, and understandings of authentic ritual emerging from the work of Lukken and Leeds-Hurwitz, I propose that a ritually meaningful (for Lukken, "authentic"), wedding in the Mennonite church will:

> 1) be a symbolic act incorporating symbols and symbolic language in order to convey identity—"being" rather than "having"—which within Anabaptist-Mennonite communities means formation of the self, the couple, and the community into disciples of Christ; and
>
> 2) confirm the existence of the Mennonite community of faith as the larger group within which the ritual makes sense.

Theologically, a ritually meaningful wedding will:

> 1) embody Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount rather than the wedding industry's emphasis on material wealth and financial status;
>
> 2) be situated within the Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of ecclesial practices as part of the church's lived ethic, and thus be political, countercultural, examples of what marriage, symbolized by the wedding ritual, means;
>
> 3) be communal/covenantal rather than individual, by returning attention to the covenantal relationship between the couple in Christ and within the community of faith reiterated in the theology of Christian marriage in *Weddings: Ideas and Resources from Mennonite Church Canada*; and

> 4) be a celebration in the form of a worship service, which directs attention to God, as opposed to the bride in particular or the material aspects of the wedding itself.[58]

Creativity should be strongly encouraged in embodying and enacting these criteria in the wedding ritual. Ritual function sanctions verbal and nonverbal forms of presentation.[59] The ritual's presentational aspects could thus appeal to any or all of the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). As mainly occasions of worship, rituals could include, for example, scripture passages revealing the relational character of God as love, which in turn demonstrates how both the couple getting married and the congregation are called to live in loving relationality, as well as silence, prayer, song, dance, and creative use of space to convey the ecclesiology and ethics of the church, and to help the couple transition into their new social state as married. Counter to the wedding industry's narrative of consumption tied particularly to the bride, the couple could give a symbolic gift to the congregation and to God, verbal or physical.

These weddings could also include potlucks organized by the congregation, an increased role for the pastor (e.g., a full-length sermon, premarital counselling), opportunity for the couple to share a testimony of their love shared in Christ, and opportunities for the congregation to be involved in the ceremony and reception (e.g., offering a blessing for the couple, giving a symbolic gift, laying on of hands, prayer). There is a necessary link between theology and practice. By participating in the wedding as worship in counter-cultural ways, both theologically and ritually, all open themselves to be formed into, and examples of, the likeness of Christ.

Conclusion

My analysis of the wedding industry's impact on the wedding ritual suggests two main conclusions signaling that the ritual is in crisis. First, the wedding's capacity to function as an authentic ritual of transition within the church is inhibited by the dominance of the capitalist economic system. This system approaches individuals as consumers and largely eliminates the possibility of symbolism in wedding rituals. Instead of embodying predominant value

[58] For worship resources for planning a wedding ritual, see Zimmerly, *Weddings*, 47-64.
[59] Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance,* 359-70.

patterns of "being" based on identity and movement from one reality into another, industry-style weddings reflect value patterns of "having" and consumption often detrimental to ritual function. Second, the industry promotes values in tension with Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, such as individual over community, and material possessions over God. Anabaptist-Mennonites should thus be critical of the industry's support of the status quo, and should draw from other sources of authority, most notably scripture, to learn how to practice weddings as both the medium and the message of the gospel.

While the economy will continue to impact religious rituals, participants can orient rituals to avoid prioritizing consumerism and the individual, and to support identity formation and mutual relationships, including those between people getting married and their relationship with Christ and the community of faith. As for wedding rituals in MC Canada and in Anabaptist-Mennonite communities more broadly, I have argued that the theological and ritual meaning of weddings flows from seeing them as an ecclesial practice within the context of Christian discipleship. Weddings, and subsequently marriages, are occasions for believers to continue to be formed into disciples of Christ within the community of faith, as sexual partners committed to loving relationality and mutuality, and for believers to think primarily in terms of relational goods rather than consumer goods.

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