

## ***The Church as the Bride of Christ***

This afternoon, we're going to consider the image of the church as the bride of Christ. To understand this image properly, we need to understand something of Jewish wedding customs of the first century – which aren't necessarily the same as Australian wedding customs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet, it's not always easy to determine just exactly what the Jewish wedding traditions of the first century were. As you read various books and listen to different preachers, it seems to me that some of them build their own traditions that aren't always firmly based on the evidence we have available. It's not always easy to sift through the different suggestions that are made.

Jewish marriages often happened in three stages:

- the engagement;
- the betrothal; and
- the wedding.

The **engagement** was the initial contract for two parties – one male and one female – to get married. It seems this usually was entered into by the two fathers on behalf of their families. The contract was what was best for the families or the community as a whole – rather than the particular couple involved.

- The two people to be married could be quite young when the engagement was contracted – still learning to walk. They themselves may not have set eyes on each other.
- Or the engagement may not happen until a short time before the betrothal. It may happen because a particular young woman caught the eye of a young man and he approaches his father about marrying

her and the father agrees this is what's best for the community.

- Or the engagement may result from all sorts of scenarios in between.

The **betrothal** was the second stage and happened much closer to the wedding – although there was still usually a year between the engagement and the wedding. Depending on who you read about this, the betrothal could involve a number of things:

- A formal contractual ceremony between the young man and the young woman where they pledge themselves to each other.
- The drinking of a cup of wine together.
- The payment of the bride price.
- The promise of the groom that he goes to prepare a place for the bride and he'll come to get her.

The betrothal was considered binding. To break a betrothal was the equivalent of divorce. If the man died during the betrothal period, the woman was considered a widow. During the period of the betrothal, it was expected the bride would do two main things:

- keep herself for the young man to whom she was promised – that is, discreetly cover herself in public and not flirt with other young men; and
- make herself ready for when the groom came to collect her – both by having her bridal attire ready and not straying too far from home.

The **wedding** happened when the groom had the place ready for his wife – ready to the extent that it was approved by his father. He then went to fetch his bride and bring her to that place. Some seem to suggest the preparation of two places:

- A wedding chamber within the father's house to be used during the wedding celebrations; and
- A separate house to be used by the couple once the wedding celebrations were complete.

There's also some disagreement over what happened at the wedding itself in relation to whether there were any formal ceremonies – some suggest there were and some there weren't. The important factor seems to be the retirement of the couple to the wedding chamber to consummate their union. When it was announced that was accomplished, then the party began.

So it was an elaborate procedure. Some parts are similar to the way we do things; some parts are different. As I went through that, your mind probably remembered various bits of the Bible – some of them to do with marriage, some to do with what we're taught about Jesus and His relationship to His people.

We're going to look at a couple of passages where the church is referred to in these marriage terms – as the betrothed of Christ or the bride of Christ. First, 2 Corinthians 11:2-4

*I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*

What do we learn about the church from that passage? **First**, the church is betrothed to Jesus. That is, she's been promised to Him – in this instance by Paul.

When did this happen? It's not actually specified in the passage. One may speculate that it happens at conversion – when a person commits themselves to Jesus and thus joins the church. That's what seems to fit in best with the rest of the New Testament. Otherwise, I think you have to come up with some sort of post-conversion experience that isn't mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament – and that just doesn't fit with what the New Testament tells us about the Christian life. So, this is something that's relevant to all Christians.

One thing that's worth thinking about (although I'm only mentioning it in passing now): we think of conversion as an individual thing – yet, Paul here talks of the church as a whole as the betrothed. He's concerned for the church's well-being and the possible seduction of the church.

If we're talking about betrothal, what level of commitment's required from the church? What does this mean for us as individuals? What does it mean for us as a church? These are important questions to ask. What are the other commitments that are part of our lives that are inconsistent with our commitment to Jesus? Are there some commitments our culture expects that are inconsistent with our betrothal to Jesus? For example, our culture expects a certain level of commitment to consumerism – how does that fit with our commitment to Jesus? It expects a significant level of commitment to secularism and a secular worldview – how does that fit with our

commitment to Jesus? Could we as a church be accused of flirtatious behaviour during this time of our betrothal? What about individuals within the church?

Lesley and I listened to a sermon on Jeremiah yesterday. Jeremiah's a book of God's judgment – especially on His people. God charges them with adultery – His people turned away from their allegiance to God and chased after other gods. They turned from behaving as God's people to wickedness. God charged them with unfaithfulness. It was not how they should live. It was far below what God wanted for them. Jeremiah's not the only prophet who brought that message.

**Secondly**, as the bride of Jesus, the church is supposed to maintain her purity during the waiting period. What's purity in this context? Here I think the focus is on doctrinal purity – on remaining faithful to the one to whom she's promised. Yet here, these people are being deceived in their minds as to the truth – and thus to their commitment to Jesus. Paul writes of:

- a different Jesus
- a different spirit
- a different gospel

They're in danger of accepting a Jesus who isn't the true Jesus and a gospel that isn't based solely on the free gift of God because of Jesus' death for them.

Did the Corinthian church think they were being false to Jesus? No.

- They were following some false apostles who still spoke of Jesus – and who claimed to be apostles of Jesus. In all probability, they were quite orthodox in many of their beliefs about Jesus – but not all of

them. Thus, the Corinthians didn't think they had abandoned Jesus at all –the name of Jesus was still very prominent in their meetings.

- These people had altered the gospel in some way. People make different suggestions at this point. Some suggest these false apostles were teaching some form of Jewish legalism – but that doesn't seem to be the thrust of these chapters. What seems more prominent in these chapters is this:
  - They forgot about the *meekness and gentleness of Christ*. Instead they boasted of their own abilities.
  - They forgot about sharing in Christ's sufferings. Instead they emphasised the triumph of God's power in their ministry through miracles and visions.
  - They forgot about Jesus' example of humble service. Instead they expected others to serve them.

Can this sort of thing happen today?

- The Jehovah's Witnesses preach Jesus – but it isn't the same Jesus we preach.
- The prosperity gospel people preach Jesus – but it isn't the same Jesus we preach.
- Some people preach a gentle and loving and forgiving Jesus – but ignore anything that speaks of Jesus getting angry at sin or the possibility of Him being judge.

There are still people who present a different Jesus and a different gospel. It's important to maintain our purity at this point.

Yet, here we run into a bit of a difficulty. How accurate

does our picture of Jesus have to be? Where do you draw the line between what's a true Jesus and what's a false one? Do I have to get everything exactly right – and refuse to associate with anyone who disagrees with me in the smallest detail? For example, the doctrine of the incarnation – Jesus, the one person, is fully God and fully man. Do I understand that fully? No. Can I explain it perfectly? No – and many people with minds better than mine also struggle with it. Here, we struggle with the finite understanding the infinite. We have limits. So, we need to recognise this – in ourselves and in others. We need to approach discussions about Jesus with gentleness and humility. Our aim must be to know the truth and to benefit those who disagree with us. Yet, there does come a point where we have to say: No, that's not the true Jesus and if you persist in believing in that false Jesus we cannot recognise you as one of us.

The second passage to look at is Ephesians 5:22

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his*

*body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

Is the church betrothed or married in this passage? Our initial reading of the passage seems to suggest a wife – but the rest of the New Testament points to the wedding taking place at Jesus' return. And then the passage itself speaks of Jesus' desire to present His bride as holy and blameless – talking about what the church will be like in eternity, rather than what we're like now. Perhaps Paul uses the term *wife* for the betrothal period.

What do we learn about the church from this passage? **First**, submission to Jesus. Jesus is the One who calls the shots. The church isn't supposed to be interested in her own will, but in what Jesus wants. Jesus is the One declared King in God's universe – the One to whom the church submits as Lord.

What does this mean in practical terms? Jesus' word – the Bible – becomes central. We want to live – both as individuals and as a group – in line with what Jesus says. That means trying to understand what He's said and conforming ourselves to it. That's why the Bible's so central to our gatherings.

**Secondly**, we're bought by Jesus. Is there perhaps a hint here of the bride-price – or is that simply something that I'm reading into the way Paul uses the illustration? The New Testament elsewhere speaks of our redemption –

that Jesus paid the price of His death to purchase our freedom from our slavery to sin – and all that entails. We've been bought with a price.

**Thirdly**, God's purpose is that we be holy and blameless. It's similar to the Corinthians passage in having the idea of purity. That was an important ingredient for brides in those days. It was expected she'd provide proof of her virginity on her wedding night – and some suggest this proof was made public.

In Corinthians, the focus was on doctrinal purity – here, it shouldn't be limited to that. Indeed, the main focus may well be on moral purity in this passage – although the nature of the purity isn't specified.

It's worth mentioning the Old Testament background again. The betrothal imagery's used often by the prophets to describe the relationship between God and Israel – or the failure of Israel within that relationship. Israel acted in ways that didn't befit a betrothed woman. She was unfaithful. She prostituted herself. She committed spiritual adultery.

- It describes her idolatry –chasing after other gods.
- It describes her immoral behaviour.
- It describes her lack of trust in God – chasing after alliances with other nations.

That background is, I think, important in understanding how the New Testament speaks of the church as the bride of Jesus. Those warnings issued by the prophets are important to us.

- We need to be faithful to our promise – remain true to Jesus and our commitment to Him.
- We need to maintain our purity – not become

immoral in our behaviour like Israel.

We often think of purity in individual terms. What's it mean for a church to maintain purity? How can we work at this in practical terms? In past times, churches exercised discipline in certain areas:

- Sexual immorality
- Embezzlement
- Things recognised as wrong in society

These days, as the standards of our society change, we've tended to soften our stance in some of those areas. But I don't think that's the only reason. I think there are two other significant contributing factors:

- One is that the boundary between those in the church and those outside has become blurred. In our right desire to welcome non-Christians into our services so they may hear the gospel, we've lost our distinction in relation to who's in and who's out. Only God knows the heart, we say.
- The second reason is that we've always gone soft on some sins: gossip, pride, greed, envy. No one took disciplinary action in relation to these persisting in the church. They were left unchecked. Eventually, we realised the hypocrisy of this – but instead of taking disciplinary action against gossips, we decided to stop taking disciplinary action against anyone (maybe because we were scared no one would be exempt).

**Fourthly**, we're loved by Jesus. This conveys the idea of belonging (we dealt with that last Sunday with the building image) and being cared for (which was also part of the family image).

**Fifthly**, unity's hinted at. There's only one bride. I don't want to dwell on this aspect tonight, because it's a major focus of the body imagery that we'll deal with next Sunday.

The third passage – or series of passages – to examine this evening begins at Revelation 19:7-9

*"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God."*

Revelation 21:1-4

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Revelation 21:9-11

*One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem,*

*coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.*

Revelation 21:27

*Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

It would be useful to read also some of the other verses in this chapter – but I've tried to keep it fairly brief. There are things there we've already looked at – we belong to Jesus; our commitment is to Him; we're to keep ourselves pure for Him. Those themes are still there.

One of the major things that comes through in this series of passages is the future element – it's talking about the time when Jesus returns for His bride. It's talking about our Christian hope. It's talking about the perfection of the future. We're not yet what we shall be. We're conscious that there's still much that's not holy about us – both as individuals and as a church. We're conscious that we don't deserve to belong to Jesus – even more so the longer we've been Christians. Jesus is changing us, but there's much that still needs changing. But we're not yet at the wedding day. There's the anticipation of the future that will be – the future when there'll be no more suffering or sorrow and, more importantly, no more sin. We long for that time. That's part of the engagement period. Along with that comes the challenge to persevere in our preparation – to grow in our commitment to Jesus and the purity He wants in us and to ensure we're ready when Jesus returns.