

WATCHTOWER

BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF NEW YORK, INC.

CABLE WAY

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May 15, 1988

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS

Dear Brothers:

Re: GUIDELINES ON WEDDING PROCEDURES

Marriage is a sacred arrangement instituted by the Creator of mankind, Jehovah God. (Mark 10:6-9) The Christian congregation has an obligation to uphold the honorableness of marriage. (Heb. 13:4) Thus, when a brother and sister request that their marriage be performed by a Christian elder, or when they request use of the Kingdom Hall for their wedding, how can the elders show proper respect and due honor for the marital arrangement? It is important that congregation elders give careful consideration to the many details involved, making sure that everything is handled in full accordance with legal and Scriptural requirements. The following guidelines are provided to assist the body of elders in handling things properly. Please study this letter carefully and review it each time a request is made for an elder to perform a marriage or for the Kingdom Hall to be used for a wedding, making sure that all details and circumstances conform to these guidelines.

WHO IS QUALIFIED TO PERFORM WEDDINGS?

While all baptized brothers are ministers, "it is preferred that congregation elders, men well spoken of in the congregation, care for this responsibility in order that all things take place in proper order." (km 12/81 4; see also w84 4/15 13-14.) If the couple has a specific elder in mind, they can personally ask him to officiate at their wedding. He should not agree to perform the wedding until it has been confirmed that the legal and Scriptural requirements outlined herein have been met. He should cooperate fully with the body of elders. If the couple has no preference, the body of elders can select one of their number to care for this assignment.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

In some areas, local authorities require that a minister who performs weddings register and provide some proof of his ordination. In many cases, they will accept a letter signed by the body of elders confirming his appointment as an elder in the local congregation. If this does not suffice, the elder should determine the exact requirements and then, if necessary, write to the Society requesting assistance. At the completion of the wedding, the elder officiating must make sure that the marriage registration (license)

form is properly filled out and signed by the couple and/or the necessary witnesses as required and then promptly sent to the appropriate officials for registration. It is suggested that the elder keep a photocopy of the completed marriage registration (license) form in his files. If the law requires that written records be maintained in the congregation's office, the congregation secretary should be certain that proper records are made.

If one or both of the parties were previously married, the elder asked to perform the marriage should check with the couple and/or the body of elders to see that there is conclusive evidence establishing that a legal, final divorce has been obtained, legally freeing the person(s) for remarriage. Also, any other legal requirements in your area should be complied with.

SCRIPTURAL FREEDOM TO REMARRY

God's Word clearly shows that adultery--porneia--is the only Scriptural ground for divorce and remarriage. (Matt. 5:32; 19:9) The congregation cannot be involved in the remarriage of any individual who is unable to establish properly his or her Scriptural freedom to do so. It is the responsibility of the individual to produce convincing evidence to establish Scriptural freedom to remarry. The individual, not the elders, bears the responsibility to gather such evidence. The evidence must show that porneia was committed and that the innocent mate has refused to extend forgiveness.

What is acceptable evidence of Scriptural freedom to remarry? Hearsay or strong suspicion that one's mate committed adultery is not sufficient; the evidence must be conclusive. Bear in mind also that resumption of sex relations after learning of the wrongdoing always constitutes forgiveness, nullifying such as a basis for Scriptural divorce.--See w81 3/1 30-1; w68 255-6; ks81 168-9.

It should be noted that if two or more credible eyewitnesses can confirm that the mate has stayed all night in the same house with a person of the opposite sex (or a known homosexual) under improper circumstances, the elders may put the responsibility upon the innocent mate to decide if this is sufficient basis for him or her to obtain a divorce and marry another. The individual must answer to Jehovah in accord with the facts in the case. (Of course, if the mate being charged with such conduct is a baptized Witness, then the judicial committee reviewing the testimony of the witnesses would also need to decide what disciplinary action is warranted in the case of the offending mate.)--See ks77 69.

If an unbelieving mate privately confesses adultery (porneia) to his Christian mate, the innocent one may choose to give the elders a signed statement to that effect, indicating that he or she has not extended forgiveness and wishes to end the marriage Scripturally and legally. The elders will consider whether they can accept the statement, leaving the matter between the innocent mate and Jehovah.--See w77 607-8.

The fact that someone obtained an unscriptural divorce before coming to a knowledge of the truth would not provide a basis for claiming Scriptural freedom. It would still have to be established that a Scriptural basis for the divorce exists before remarriage would be acceptable. If the individual contemplating remarriage admits that he has been guilty of fornication himself after his mate divorced him, the marriage could be considered ended in God's sight. Or, if his former mate has remarried or admitted to committing fornication since the divorce, this too would provide adequate evidence to free one Scripturally.--See w80 1/15 30-1.

Any couple that ignores their responsibility in this important matter and gets married without establishing Scriptural and legal freedom to do so, would be subject to judicial action by the congregation if it is later found that they were not Scripturally or legally free.

BOTH PARTIES MUST BE IN GOOD STANDING

It is the responsibility of the elder assigned to perform the marriage to talk personally to the couple before the wedding, tactfully but straightforwardly inquiring about their conduct during their courtship. If they have engaged in sexual uncleanness of a serious nature, or in other grave wrongdoing, they cannot use the Kingdom Hall for their wedding. Depending on the circumstances, it could be left up to the elder to decide whether or not he would perform the wedding at another location. Any serious wrongdoing uncovered would have to be handled by a judicial committee. The body of elders must approve use of the Kingdom Hall for a wedding. In every case when couples request the use of the Kingdom Hall, the elders should give consideration to the reputation of the couple in the community, making sure there is nothing that would reflect unfavorably on the congregation. If either the bride or the groom is from another congregation, contact should be made with the elders in that congregation requesting information to establish that he or she is baptized and in good standing. This should be done before agreeing to perform the wedding or before agreeing that it can be held in the Kingdom Hall.--See om 62, par. 2.

WILL THEY BE EVENLY YOKED?

It would be improper for an elder to perform a wedding where one is baptized and the other is not. (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14; km 12/81 4) This direction also applies in cases where the unbaptized one claims to be dedicated and plans to be baptized in the near future. When elders are approached by a baptized member of the congregation who is planning marriage to an unbeliever, they should give admonition in harmony with what is stated in the March 15, 1982, Watchtower, page 31 and the November 15, 1986, Watchtower, pages 26-30. It is unwise for elders to perform weddings of worldly individuals who are not seriously involved in the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. How could an elder be sure such ones are Scripturally free to marry? What effect would an elder's doing so have on others and on his own reputation in the congregation?

THE WEDDING DISCOURSE

Since marriage is sacred and the wedding is an important event having far-reaching effects on those involved, the marriage discourse should reflect dignity, honor, and seriousness. (Heb. 13:4) Its purpose is to impress on the minds of the participants, as well as those observing, that marriage brings serious, God-given responsibilities that the Christian couple must assume and discharge in full harmony with the Scriptures. This is not an appropriate time to tell humorous stories or read poems simply to entertain or amuse the audience. It would be improper to show undue familiarity by discussing personal matters involving the couple, as this would detract from the dignity of the occasion. Also, the speaker should avoid making explicit or questionable remarks about sexual matters. The talk should be Scripturally-based, warm, and spiritually upbuilding. Since the elder speaking is an ordained minister representing the local congregation as well as the Society, his discourse should demonstrate the same dignity and seriousness we expect to observe in a public talk of fine quality given to the congregation. The entire wedding discourse and ceremony should not exceed 30 minutes in length. The wedding vows used should conform to the requirements of local law and should honor Jehovah God, the Source of marriage. Elders should use the vows presented in the April 15, 1984, issue of The Watchtower, page 14.

When only certain brothers are officially authorized to give the vows, these brothers should be certain that the elder giving the wedding talk is made aware of the above counsel.

USE OF THE KINGDOM HALL

The body of elders is responsible for approving use of the Kingdom Hall for a wedding. The couple that wishes to use the hall should submit a written request well in advance of the wedding date, indicating the specific day and time they desire to use the hall. Before giving approval, the elders should check with any other congregation(s) using the hall to make sure that what the couple has requested does not conflict with any planned congregation activities. All of these matters should be properly handled well in advance so as to avoid last-minute problems. The hall cannot be used for a "second wedding" ceremony.--See km 1/77 4.

Elders should inquire about the wedding party. It should not include any person "whose scandalous life-style grossly conflicts with Bible principles" or whose conduct would raise questions in the minds of those attending. (See w84 4/15 15.) The elders may permit the bridal party to have a wedding rehearsal in the Kingdom Hall if such does not interfere with other congregation arrangements and if it is properly supervised. Any decoration of the Kingdom Hall or rearrangement of chairs must be approved by the body of elders. Only uplifting music, such as is found in the songbook of Jehovah's Witnesses, should be played at the wedding.--See w84 4/15 15.

If a worldly photographer will be present to take pictures, the groom bears the responsibility to see that he is informed about

being properly attired and showing due respect for the dignity of the occasion. Picture taking should not interfere with or detract from the spiritual atmosphere of the occasion. No photographs should be taken during prayers. The elders should not permit any worldly customs to be included in what takes place. If brothers who regularly serve as attendants at the Kingdom Hall are not available, the elders should make sure that brothers who are good examples are used to care for this responsibility. There should be an orderly seating of those in attendance as well as organized parking of the cars.--1 Cor. 14:40.

A disfellowshipped person may attend a wedding held in the Kingdom Hall as long as he conducts himself properly. If a disfellowshipped person is going to attend the reception, the groom should make that known to other guests who may choose not to be present.--See W81 9/15 30.

RECEPTION

It would be wise for the elder requested to perform the wedding to inquire about the activities planned for the reception. If something questionable is planned, he can kindly discuss it with the couple and refer them to pages 16-22 of the April 15, 1984, issue of The Watchtower. By clarifying matters ahead of time with the couple to be married, the elder performing the ceremony will be able to participate conscientiously in the arrangements without negative feelings.

ELDERS BEAR A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY

The handling of weddings reflects either favorably or unfavorably on the truth and Jehovah's people. Christian weddings should reflect a high regard for the sacredness of marriage and its serious responsibilities. Carefully review and adhere to these guidelines and to any future direction provided by the Society. Your doing so each time a request is made for an elder to perform a wedding or for the wedding to be held in the Kingdom Hall should enable elders to avoid serious, embarrassing, or disturbing situations that could bring reproach on the congregation or the Kingdom message. Genuine concern and careful planning on the part of the elders will exert a wholesome influence on the participants and result in a fine witness to those who attend. Weddings handled Scripturally and in harmony with the direction given by the Society will always be occasions for genuine rejoicing.

We pray that Jehovah will bless you as you endeavor to fulfill the weighty responsibilities placed upon you as shepherds of the flock. We send our warm Christian love.

Your brothers,

Watchtower B. & F. Society
OF NEW YORK, INC.