Mythical weddings or parabolic ones?
Pitfalls and possibilities in a technological age

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Grandma Kathryn loved to reminisce about Grandpa, and I could sit and listen to her for hours. I guess that's what happens when you put together a love-struck—and recently engaged—granddaughter and a grandmother whose love for her husband never waned. Grandpa had died almost three decades earlier. Thinking of heaven, Grandma would say, "That's a long time to wait to see your husband again!"

To me, Grandma and Grandpa's wedding sounded like a simple affair. They were married in her parents' home on Thanksgiving Day, 1946. Grandma had bought a long white dress for sixteen dollars and then snipped off the train to make it appropriate for a Mennonite wedding. The preparations had been simple; in the absence of premarital counseling, the pastor had to ask which suit-clad young man was the groom! After the ceremony and Thanksgiving dinner, the guests sent the couple off to Florida for their honeymoon.

> A shift in meaning happens when the wedding industry becomes the leading authority for our practice. A celebration that centers on the uniqueness of the couple takes our focus away from their covenant with God.

When I started planning my own wedding almost seventy years later, I hoped to keep it less than extravagant, though I knew I wouldn't match the simplicity of Grandma's wedding. Perhaps I could at least emulate her stress-free attitude, as many sources assured me that careful planning would enable me to do. I had the help of many resources Grandma lacked: wedding budget spreadsheets, online planning guides, 24-7 shopping at my fingertips for dresses and decorations, and Pinterest and theKnot.com to organize it all. My tools were products of advances in technology—social media and how-to Web sites—which promised to help me save time and money while throwing the personalized, unforgettable party of a lifetime.

And yet, as a Christ follower, I hoped our wedding would be more worshipful than unique, more Christ centered than couple centered. Given the individualized and competitive slant of social media promotions and wedding advertisements, technology seemed to be steering me in the wrong direction. Perhaps that understanding itself identifies part of the problem: we let technology speak authoritatively, and couples become the central (and often bewildered) decision makers for this covenantal practice. We could do better if we allow the church to influence and form this practice, even in a countercultural way that discerns the place of technology within weddings as a helper, not the authority.

The wedding industry as technology
My grandparents' wedding may reflect a simpler time, but it was not free of the technologies of the wedding industry. Even their simple ceremony reveals traces of the increasing attention and money being spent on a couple's special day, a trend that was picking up steam in their post–World War II era. Grandma wore a white dress, and they had a reception meal and wedding photo, all elements that were uncommon only decades earlier.

Most significantly, my grandparents celebrated their marriage with a private ceremony for family and friends. In earlier years, most couples in their Mennonite community had simply walked to the front of the church at the end of the Sunday morning service to be married. "There wasn't anything special just for the two of them," Kathryn explained. Her own parents' 1915 wedding had taken place at the pastor's home over the lunch hour, with two witnesses attending. By comparison, Kathryn and Wilmer's wedding was quite the event, influenced by an emerging sector of the economy: the wedding industry.

Rebecca Mead defines the wedding industry, which had its beginnings in the 1920s and 30s, as "the infrastructure of service providers and businesses, ranging from individual entrepreneurs to massive corporations, that seek to provide the bride and groom with the accoutrements of the wedding day."[1] Historically, weddings had been civil ceremonies of mutual public consent before moving under church jurisdiction in the late Middle Ages in Christian Europe.[2] By the twentieth century, weddings attracted more economic attention in the United States, as bridal advertise-

ments promoted beautiful nuptial events and families' spending rose to create them. Following World War II, bridal magazines endorsed lavish formal weddings as rewards for wartime sacrifices and praised extravagance as supporting democracy through investment in the capitalist economy.[3] By the 1950s the wedding industry was a strong influence on many engaged couples' wedding plans.

As technology advanced, the industry adapted, relying on magazines, billboards, television, and Web sites to maximize its influence and profits surrounding the wedding day. Couples getting married relied on the industry, altogether spending more than $70 billion each year.[4] When the Knot announced the results of its 2014 survey on wedding spending, identifying $31,213 as the average cost of a wedding, it served the industry by normalizing excessive spending for one special day.[5]

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Perhaps even more significant than the amount of money spent on weddings is the shift in meaning that happens when the wedding industry becomes the leading authority for this ecclesial practice. The industry promotes society's ideals of perfection, opulence, and competition. The celebration centers on the uniqueness of the couple rather than their covenant with God. Most disheartening, the wedding industry promotes the illusion that one can find fulfillment in a perfect wedding, which guarantees a perfect marriage.

An opportunity for formation in Christian community

In the larger society in North America, wedding and marriage preparation is moving outside the realm of the church. The wedding industry holds much more sway over most couples than do the church community and its ministers. Yet, within our communities of believers, we can savor the counter-formative opportunities weddings provide when thoughtfully practiced within church life. While we may not wholeheartedly embrace all that technology offers for marriage celebrations, we can accept the gifts that help us more faithfully serve God on our—and more often on others'—wedding days.

For believers, Christian community is essential to weddings. The community not only witnesses the wedding but also promises to support and encourage the marriage for a lifetime. While the wedding industry promotes individuality at weddings, focusing on the couple's unique story, tastes, and commitments, the church offers a communal covenant. The bride and groom do not enter a covenant alone, or solely with God. Instead, they enter a triangular covenant with God and the community, which all partners witness and promise to uphold.[6] Weddings call those gathered to consider the meaning of covenantal relationships, to strengthen current ones, and to encourage future commitments. The church pushes beyond technology's individualistic focus when it involves the whole gathered congregation as a covenantal community.

Instead of focusing on the couple's unique story, tastes, and commitments, the church offers a communal covenant between couple, community, and God, which all partners witness and promise to uphold.

Situating weddings within community life offers us the opportunity to help and encourage one another. Within the despair of Ecclesiastes, the author finds hope in companionship. "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help" (4:9–10, NRSV). These verses remind us of our commitment to one another: if one falls, if a couple falls, their mentors, church, and friends should be there to help them up. But if we isolate ourselves or abandon each other, we might find ourselves alone when we fall, without another to lift us up.

Hebrews 10:24–25a furthers the call to encourage: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." Having just explained Christ's sacrifice, the author now asks believers to respond to God's love by showing more love and encouragement. Again, the message is for the whole community, but it reminds us of the importance of living out marriage in a continuing faith community. Marriage is a context for discipleship, a place where couples invite and expect the Christian community to help them better reflect God's image in their relationship. In providing occasions to remember the call

to help and encourage one another, weddings can witness to deep commitments and abiding relationships, countering technology's pull to individualism and isolation.

Examining our treasures

Surrounded by technology's images of the ideal life, we may not realize how much our desires and practices point toward society's vision unless we consciously seek to redirect them. Jesus encourages us to turn our desires toward heaven, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). For Jesus, the way we live, what we treasure, and where we spend our money are issues of the heart, and not matters to be ignored for the sake of one glamorous day. Steve Thorngate agrees that money and theology are connected, insisting that "downsizing the wedding industry's emphasis on a two-character fairy tale is a theological issue."[7] It's about focusing on Christ and worship rather than on wedding splendor. While commercialized weddings glorify the newlyweds, worshipful weddings point our desires toward God's glorification.

Weddings are still a time to celebrate! Jesus added to the celebration at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11) and told parables about wedding banquets as images of God's kingdom (Matt. 22 and Luke 14). But going to extremes in celebrating hardly seems aligned with biblical concern for social justice. Making the wedding day a day to forgo ethical consumption does not fit the biblical model. In the wedding banquet parable recorded in Luke's Gospel, Jesus calls guests to humility and tells hosts to invite those who cannot repay them. As in Matthew 6:19–21, Jesus asks believers to set aside the treasures and honors of this world and focus instead on the rewards of the resurrection (Luke 14:14).

Extravagant weddings that flaunt wealth, uniqueness, and beauty go beyond extending the gift of hospitality to include pride and competition. And our economic choices have grave effects on our neighbors near and far, when we ignore the unhealthy conditions in which dressmakers, miners, and farmworkers labor, and the inadequacy of the compensation they receive for their work. Instead, we are called to "satisfy the needs of the afflicted" (Isa. 58:10) and align our practices with the social

justice the biblical prophets envision. We can choose local artisans and vendors in our celebrations and gift-giving, and we can seek to buy non-local items responsibly. We can give back to the community by donating leftover food, sharing gifts, and reducing waste. Though the possibilities for witness are numerous, a focusing step is to consider how our practices affect God's children and creation. Here, technology may aid our strivings. Sometimes it is to blame for directing our desires toward earthly treasures, but technological resources can also help us refocus on God's kingdom—if we point them in that direction.

Parabolic weddings

For those searching for truth and honesty, a wedding is not the most likely place to find it. Weddings often project a mythical image of life where human relationships are perfect, wealth is abundant, and your community is an audience to impress and entertain. John Dominic Crossan describes myths as structures that resolve disturbing binary opposites by selecting the dominant to rule.[8] In weddings, we consider the binary opposites of joy and pain, joining together and tearing apart, healthy relationships and disastrous ones. The myth then is that these opposites can be resolved with a hefty dose of romantic love: on the wedding day, joyful beginnings trump painful endings.

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In contrast to the wedding industry's mythical approach, the church's practice can bring hope by offering parabolic weddings. By reinstating life's contradictions and paradoxes, parables shake up the calm that myths falsely create. Parabolic weddings hold the tension between binary opposites, inviting us to recognize the paradox that marriage is difficult and hardships lie ahead, *and* marriage is delightful and much joy lies ahead. The awe of living into the parable is that we can confidently step into this paradox, relying on the strength and faithfulness of God who enters the covenant with us.

The whole community has the opportunity to join in the making of a parabolic wedding. Counseling beforehand can focus

on a lifelong commitment rather than a single day's activities. Our conversations with engaged friends can go deeper than asking about wedding colors and themes to seeking ways to support the couple spiritually and relationally. A parabolic wedding can draw

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in the paradox that marriage is a risky step to take, yet these two have decided to take that risk. They enter that paradox because of their faith in God's grace, the greatest paradox of all—that God in Christ would die for those who hate him. We can share God's grace in the wedding's sermon and proclaim it through scripture and song. We add to the parable by acknowledging truths, whether in vows that recognize the sad times that will come along with the good or in blessings that encourage forgiveness and commitment in the face of sin and disappointment. Altogether, a wedding that brings hope in the midst of technologies' myths is one that already seeks to fulfill the purpose of marriage: to draw us and others closer to Christ. As C. S. Lewis said, "The Church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] into Christ."[9] Parabolic weddings join the church's aim as they reflect God's grace in the paradox of forgiving, committed relationships.

A good use of time

In the months before my wedding, the way I spent my time became a critical interaction between wedding preparations and technology. Whenever I bemoaned the murk of wedding planning, my confidants swiftly directed me toward a host of wedding Web sites that promised to save me time and creative energy. It quickly became apparent however, that instead of saving time, online searches soaked up my time. The searches, like the possibilities, seemed endless.

Even though technology made my wedding searches faster and my organization more efficient, I wondered whether I was spending my time faithfully. The most important investment of our engagement period was strengthening relationships—our spiritual life together, our bonds with family and mentors, and especially our connection to God. Even if technology could make our

wedding planning more efficient, we needed to consider how we could use that time most faithfully.

Technology also enables us to erase the limits of time and place, expanding our witness by allowing someone at a distance to listen in or watch the wedding later. In a way, our faith community is enlarged through extending the ceremony to those not physically present, but I wonder if we lose some of the value of personal contact and bearing witness to the covenant. We yearn for deep involvement in each other's lives, expressed in vows on this wedding day and continuing beyond it. While technology may aid our connection, it cannot replace the joy of abiding with our brothers and sisters in the steps of our Christian journey.

That yearning for deep personal connection, for sitting together face-to-face, was what made me rue the hours spent in wedding planning. My engagement time narrowed to a central focus when I learned that my beloved grandmother was in the last stage of her life. Suddenly, my priorities came into focus. Savoring our relationship and gleaning my grandmother's wisdom were much more important than spending time selecting dresses and decorations.

Yet I also needed to attend to the opportunities in this covenant-making day, opportunities to join in celebration with our faith community, to share hope in the awesomeness of God's grace, and to strengthen our commitments. In some ways, technology helps bring these opportunities to life. We can use technology to stay in touch with people or to gather ideas about being better global neighbors in our wedding celebrations. At the same time, we need to be aware of the formative power of technology's images.

We are easily entangled in the lavish and romanticized culture of the wedding industry and unknowingly let our desires be directed by its images and its mantra that the wedding day is all about us. While the church may cautiously embrace technology's gifts for our wedding celebrations, we must pay careful attention to how we direct our desires and focus for that covenant day. On our wedding day, as in every day along our journey, we must focus on God whose grace gives us hope for our commitments and whose faithfulness strengthens us to keep them.

Notes

1 Rebecca Mead, *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 5.

2 Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 202.

3 Vicki Howard, "The Bridal Business," *OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 1 (January 2010), 52–53.

4 Ibid., 52.

5 Sabrina Toppa, "This is how Much an Average Wedding Now Costs in America," http://time.com/3743699/average-wedding-cost-america-marriage/.

6 Dave Bergen, "Theology of Christian Marriage," in *Weddings: Ideas and Resources from Mennonite Church Canada*, ed. Karen Martens Zimmerly (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2004), 7.

7 Steve Thorngate, "Church(y) Weddings: When Worship is the Main Event," *The Christian Century* (May 28, 2014), 26.

8 John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975), 51–52.

9 C. S. Lewis, "Is Christianity Hard or Easy?" in *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 195. Greg Smalley and Erin Smalley made this connection between the purposes of marriage and Christianity in their book, *Before You Plan Your Wedding . . . Plan Your Marriage* (New York: Howard Books, 2008), 51.

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