

Six Tips on Performing Weddings for Unchurched, Non-Christian Couples

By Aubrey Malphurs

(*Number 11, August 20, 2003*) This quarter I want you to have a copy of an article that I wrote for Rick Warren's Minister's Toolbox. They want to reference a new book that Keith Willhite and I wrote entitled *A Contemporary Handbook for Weddings, Funerals, and Other Occasions* (Kregel Publications). My prayer is that it might help you to minister effectively in the lives of non-Christians.

There was a time in my ministry as a pastor when I communicated to inquiring unchurched, non-Christian couples that I wasn't interested in performing their weddings. I didn't express it as harshly as it sounds, but that was clearly my attitude. My thinking was, If they can't bother to come to church, then I can't bother to cater to their desire to be married in the church, at least my church.

I have since repented (changed my mind) of this attitude. I now see marrying unchurched, non-Christian couples as a wonderful opportunity to reach them for Christ as well as their unchurched, unbelieving friends. What changed my mind? I have a desire to reach the neighbors living in my community for Christ. Most are unbelievers who don't attend church. One day a doctor and a nurse who were cohabiting and lived across the street asked me to perform their wedding. After some careful soul-searching along with some Bible study, I agreed to do it.

What did I learn from this situation? And how might it help you should you be open to marrying unchurched, non-Christian couples? The following are six tips.

Tip #1: Determine where you stand theologically on marriages involving unsaved people.

What do you believe the Bible teaches about performing marriages that involve lost people? Are you comfortable with marrying a believer and an unbeliever? What about two unbelievers? Scripture is clear that believers aren't to marry unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-16). This is what some refer to as a mixed marriage. In these situations I counsel couples as to what Scripture says and encourage them to obey God. Chances are good that they'll get married anyway. But I won't perform the ceremony.

However, my theology says that it's okay to marry two believers or two unbelievers. Though Scripture isn't entirely clear on the latter, I believe that God would have two unbelievers marry than live together. The primary reason is that marriage is a divine institution for the entire human race, not just Christians (Gen. 2:24). God in his common grace wants to bless unbelievers as well as believers and knows that it's best for their relationship that they make a marriage commitment to one another as opposed to living together. Another reason is for the sake of any children. Kids desperately need two parents who've committed to one another not only as husband and wife but as dad and mom.

One final note, if you're a pastor, you would be wise to inform your governing board as to your theology should you agree with my view. You don't want them to be caught by surprise should someone complain to them that you're marrying unbelievers.

Tip #2: Weigh each situation and decide if it's wise to perform the ceremony in the first place.

While it's permissible biblically to marry two unbelievers, that doesn't necessarily mean that you should.

Following are several questions that will help you make wise decisions on which lost couples that you marry and don't marry. First, ask them why they want to get married? What are their reasons and are they good ones? Second, is someone pressuring them into this marriage such as parents, an in-law, or friends? In one case a man told me that his dad said he was "living in sin" and should get married (though neither he nor his father

where religious people). Third, Is someone pressuring you to marry them? Fourth, What are the chances that this marriage will survive? Do you think it's likely to last? As unbelievers do they have the emotional maturity to survive? Fifth, If you perform the wedding, is there some reason that you might regret this later in life? Finally, how will you react emotionally if the marriage doesn't make it? Can you handle this?

Tip #3: Insist on a reasonable amount of time for counseling prior to the wedding ceremony.

Prior to committing to marry an unbelieving couple, determine if your schedule allows enough time for you to counsel them. If not, I wouldn't commit to do the ceremony. It's better not to do it than to do it poorly in the name of Christ.

That the couple is asking you to perform the ceremony gives you some leverage as to the circumstances surrounding this event-in this case the date for the ceremony. So, don't be afraid to use it.

This tip raises the question, What is a reasonable amount of time? If the couple plans to marry next week or a month from now, I respectfully decline involvement. That's not enough time! I insist that we meet five or six times over the next few months for at least a one hour, possibly a two hour session. A primary reason is that today's unchurched non-believers are biblically illiterate and need time to process biblical teaching and the gospel message to understand and accept it. A second reason is that they need time to work through the material that I use for their counseling.

Tip #4: Take the unbelieving couple through biblical material on marriage.

Though they're unbelievers and may not accept the Bible as divine, authoritative truth for their lives, it's imperative that you expose them to biblical material on marriage. My prayer is that God will use this exposure to bring them to himself (John 16:7-11).

You may want to develop your own material for this time of exposure. There is also material available to help you. In particular, I used Norm Wright's material combined with my own.

I would suggest that you cover the essential, basic concepts that you would cover if both were Christians. This would include topics such as God's definition of marriage and how they'll handle decision making (Eph. 5:22-33). Additional topics are finances (budgeting), relationship with in-laws, plans for having children, parenting of children, church attendance, and other similar issues.

Tip #5: Use the counseling sessions to communicate the gospel and give them opportunities to accept Christ.

Every time you meet with the couple you'll have opportunity to present the gospel. This could take place at the initial meeting when you explore their situation and probe as to why they want to get married. As you explore what Scripture teaches on marriage, you can use that material to cover the gospel. For example, you should cover what the Bible says about the role of the husband and wife in marriage from Ephesians 5. Here Paul says that the husband is to love his wife as Christ loves his church and died for it. This passage provides you with a perfect opportunity to explain the gospel and how it relates to their marriage.

A question that couples often wrestle with is will they take their kids to church? While the couple may not attend church, ironically they see value in taking their children to church. Here's another opportunity to communicate the gospel.

Keep in mind when communicating the gospel that unlike in the early to middle 20th century, fewer people today know much about the Bible and have heard the gospel. Consequently, it may take some time for them to "get it" as the Holy Spirit works with what little they know. Consequently, don't be surprised if they "don't get it the first few times. Be patient with them and consider touching on it in some way each session. As you prepare for you meetings, ask yourself how you might relate it to the gospel?

Tip #6: Use the wedding ceremony as an opportunity to present the gospel.

Unchurched, unbelieving people have lots of lost friends and relatives who will attend the wedding ceremony. This is a good opportunity for them to hear, likely for the first time, the gospel.

How might you approach this? If the couple accepts Christ as Savior, then work their testimony into the ceremony. Here's how you might articulate this: "Mike and Mary have asked me to share something that's most personal but special with you. It's their newly found faith in Christ. Then explain the gospel, or better let them do it if you feel that they can articulate it well enough. (You might want to briefly interview them.) Close with a short invitation for the guests to consider and accept the claims of the gospel. Again, you could say something to the effect: "You are here at this wedding today to honor this couple. However, you could do them no greater honor than to accept their Savior as your Savior. I want to give you a moment to think about this and will be available at the reception should you have questions."

If the couple doesn't profess faith in Christ, then think as to how you might creatively interject the gospel. For example, when I performed the ceremony for one such couple, I mentioned that during our counseling times together that we talked about such things as Christ and what faith in him means. Then you relate what you discussed with them. (You don't have to mention that they didn't respond to the message of Christ.) It might not be wise to give an invitation in this situation.

In closing, I should say that the couple that lived across the street didn't to my knowledge accept Christ. Would I do it again? You bet I would! My reason and perhaps yours is that I don't get a lot of contact with unbelieving, unchurched people. This was an eye-opening experience that was invaluable in understanding them and how they think in terms of addressing their needs and reaching them for the Savior.

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