



Is it a Biblical obligation or merely a Church tradition that God's ministry officiate during a wedding or burial of Church members?

While the current practices of the Church of God have been shaped by both national laws and customs regarding the conducting of both weddings and funerals, the ultimate basis is firmly established in Scripture. These significant events of a Christian's life are of great importance in the plan which God has established for all of mankind.

The joining together of a man and woman in marriage is a holy ordinance of God. This can be seen from numerous Scriptures. Marriage was established by God from the beginning of mankind's existence on the earth. From Genesis 1:27-28, we see that God created male and female humans. In Genesis 2:20-25, it is further explained that the man and the woman were to be joined together, and the woman is specifically designated as the man's wife. Further confirmation is given that it was God Who established marriage: "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9; compare, too, Matthew 19:1-9). It is of particular significance that in the previous verses, Jesus explained that Moses was allowed, because of the hardness of the people's hearts, to grant divorces for different reasons. Christ added, however, that this was not so in the beginning, and that Christians are only permitted to divorce in very limited circumstances. One reason for divorce was established in the record of the Church of God as noted in the letter from Paul to the Church at Corinth--that is, when an unbeliever is no longer pleased to dwell with the believer, and departs from his or her marriage obligations (compare 1 Corinthians 7:12, 15).

God hates divorce. Note this powerful rebuke from God to those who question why God is not blessing

them: "...Because the LORD has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife BY COVENANT" (Malachi 2:14). In Proverbs 2:17, we read that the immoral woman "forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the COVENANT OF HER GOD."

We understand that "...God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:28). More details are given concerning these appointments and their purpose in Ephesians 4:11-16, as well as in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 4:6-7; 5:17; and Hebrews 13:7. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus gives us an example of the Church of God being administered. Decisions must be made on a variety of issues by applying the Word of God and seeking God's Will through prayer. That is a part of the administration of the Church that God has given to His ministry.

Note the example found in 1 Corinthians 6:1-6. Paul strongly rebukes the members for taking matters against one another to the world ("the unrighteous... who are least esteemed by the church"-- verses 1 and 4). Rather, he shows that "a wise man" should be able to judge these problems in the Church (verse 5). Why? We in the Church of God are bound by the laws of God, and they take precedence over the laws of man, if there is a conflict. For us, the issue is a matter of submitting, first and foremost, to God's Will.

Marriage laws vary from society to society. In fact, in some nations marriages are not recognized by governmental authorities when merely and solely performed by a minister. However, for members of the Church of God--while we are to respect the laws of the land in which we live--marriage is governed by the greater laws of God. In countries, where only civil marriages are recognized by the government, Church members have asked a minister of God to officiate, in addition, over the marriage ceremony in a religious setting. During the ceremony, the minister emphasizes the purpose of marriage, and that the couple is entering into a life-

long COVENANT with God. He also places his hands on the couple, while asking God in prayer to sanctify the marriage and to set aside the couple for the holy purpose of the marriage relationship. (That God's minister lays hands on the couple is highly significant: The Biblical procedure of laying on of hands is done for "sanctification," that is, for the purpose of setting the person or persons aside for a holy purpose.)

A minister of God's Church, today, officiates in many duties associated with the Biblical command to both preach the good news of God's Kingdom and to serve the Church of God. We have the examples of Jesus Christ and of those who faithfully followed Him as recorded in God's Word. Jesus Christ, while here on the earth, specifically and ceremonially blessed little children: "And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them (!), and blessed them" (Mark 10:16). We now follow this example by setting aside a time at the Feast of Tabernacles each year to bless little children. This, then, has become a "custom" or "tradition" of the Church.

In the time of Jesus, the Jews had many customs or traditions as a part of their worship. However, Jesus, time and again, rejected the wrong aspects that had arisen: "He answered and said to them, 'Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?'" (Matthew 15:3).

Not all tradition is, of itself, bad--as we can see concerning the burial of Jesus Christ: "Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury" (John 19:40). Reading the full account of this occurrence as recorded in John 19, we note that the burial of that day was different from that of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob (Israel). Furthermore, Jacob was embalmed (Genesis 50:2). His son, Joseph, officiated in this burial, which included taking his father's body back to the promised land (compare Genesis 50:1-10, 14). A period of great mourning was observed. Likewise, we find other Biblical examples of ceremonial burials in the Bible in which customs of the day were observed (Moses: Deuteronomy 34:5-8; Samuel: 1 Samuel 25:1; David: 1 Kings 2:10; John

the Baptist: Matthew 14:11-13).

For members of the Church of God, death is to be viewed in light of God's truth (compare 1 Corinthians 15). We also read: "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). In a very true sense, Paul--through inspiration from God--established the basis for members to deal with death. For those not called to the truth of God, this knowledge is either completely missing, or it is interwoven with false and deceptive teachings about one who dies going to heaven or purgatory, limbo or hell.

Because of the understanding God has revealed to His Church, it has been a long standing practice for the elders of the Church to officiate over matters such as marriage between those who are part of the Church of God, as well as burials. However, depending on the particular situation, a minister may also conduct a memorial or burial service for non-members.

Burials are performed as a service to family and friends of the deceased when one in the faith dies and is put in a place of rest, awaiting the return of Jesus Christ to establish His Kingdom on the earth. This is, of course, a time of trial for the family and friends, due to the loss of fellowship for a time. The purpose of the service is to give comfort and hope in reminding family and friends of the fact that the very next thought the deceased will experience will occur when he or she comes forth from the grave. His or her first awareness will be the glorious, spiritual body which God will give to all His faithful children.

One distinction exists between wedding ceremonies and services performed in relation to burials and anointings for healings. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 that we are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Therefore, the ministry of the Church of the Eternal God in the USA, the Global Church of God in England, and the Church of God, a Christian Fellowship in Canada, will only officiate over a marriage between a man and woman, if both are baptized in the faith,

and have received God's Spirit. This rule does not apply, however, relative to funerals and anointing for healing.

Anointing for healing of both Church members and non-members, ordinations of deacons and deaconesses or elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-9), and baptisms are instances where God's ministers administer or officiate. In ALL of these cases, the Biblical procedure of laying on of hands is practiced (compare James 5:14; Luke 4:40 regarding healing; Acts 6:6; 2 Timothy 1:6 regarding ordinations; and Acts 8:17; 19:6 regarding baptisms). This is all done by the ministry because God has established this procedure for His Church: "For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 2:7).

It is an awesome responsibility to stand as representatives of God and Jesus Christ in matters such as these. Likewise, lest we look upon the administration of God's Church lightly, let us also consider the warning of Hebrews 5:4 concerning what God has ordained: "And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was."