

Subscribers Needed

by Theodore Plantinga

When I was an undergraduate, I recall hearing considerable discussion about the ceremonies and formalities involved in getting married. My circle of acquaintances included a couple of students who repeated age-old arguments about the futility of relying on a piece of paper to guarantee fidelity and continued love. Some were inclined to eliminate the public and legal aspect of a wedding ceremony from their understanding of what it means to be married.

At the time it struck me as radical talk. Today it is no longer so strange. The term "marriage," which still possesses some magic in our jaded culture, is being pulled this way and that. According to some thinkers today, a man can be married to a man, and a woman to a woman. Perhaps polygamy will be revived. And the income tax authorities add to the debate by deeming "common-law" couples to be married as well. (Do you remember the old expression "living in sin"?) It appears that the formal promise made in the presence of God and a company of witnesses is no longer needed.

Against the background of these developments, I find something commendable in the movement known as Promise-Keepers. This movement seeks to call men back to certain promises and commitments they have made. Yet many of the men whom the movement seeks to lead have never made the *formal* commitment to a woman that is implied in the name of the organization. They are men in common-law relationships. Somewhere in the background of the Promise-Keepers thinking lurks the notion that sexual relations imply a promise of some sort. Presumably the leaders in such a movement would like to see the promise made explicit in a wedding ceremony.

If we were discussing these things in college, in someone's dorm room during the wee small hours, I'm sure the argument would be made (not by me) that weddings in the formal sense have not always been a part of human life. Why does a marriage relationship have to include a wedding and signatures? Why not just begin living as man and wife? The answer to this question, I now realize (I don't think I saw this back in my college days), is that man is by nature a being who can make and keep promises. Much of human life is covenantally regulated by promises which we make and then strive to keep. We

bind ourselves, and we should not have to rely on some mechanism to keep us in line.

Reformed church life is also replete with the promise-keeping motif. Office-bearers sign a "form of subscription." Again, one might argue that we should modify our view of what an elder is -- perhaps we should consider a church member to be an elder if and when we begin to regard him or her as an authority on the Christian life and as a model for the rest of us. In that case, we would not be appointing or electing and installing elders; we would simply recognize that certain members of the local faith community are elders. Then we would be able to get along without formal ceremonies of installation and/or ordination.

Of course that's not how things are done in Reformed churches. Reformed ministers, elders and deacons are promise-keepers who make public promises to God in the presence of the congregation.

How about Reformed teachers -- or more specifically, professors? I have taught in two Reformed colleges. Soon after I began teaching at Calvin College (not on the very first day), I became a subscriber. That is to say, I was asked to come to the office of the College's president to sign the form of subscription -- the same form that is signed by all office-bearers in Christian Reformed churches. (Calvin College is owned and operated by the Christian Reformed denomination; thus its instructors are actually church employees.) There was no formal installation or inauguration in office, but there was at least a signing ceremony.

In the case of Redeemer College, things were somewhat more casual. For one thing, Redeemer has a substantially smaller basis (at least in word-count) than Calvin College. A Redeemer professor is supposed to be or become a member of the college association, and by signing his contract (which I believe he does only once), he formally subscribes to the basis of the College. In my own case, the experience of subscribing as professor was rendered somewhat vague and perfunctory by the prior fact of my having served on the College Association's board, and by my role as one of the College's founders. Back in the 1970s, I had even participated in the drafting of the College's Statement of Basis and Principles.

While the opening of the College was an impressive and memorable set of experiences (I was a member of the original faculty of nine), it did not include anything along the lines of installing or inaugurating me in my teaching office. I was duly appointed, and when the time came to set sail in September of 1982,

I began to teach. Did I miss out on something by not being installed or sworn in?

I am of two minds on this question. On the one hand I am a person who does not like to be fussed over. Thus I privately welcomed the lack of ceremony and formalities. But on the other hand, I take the teaching office very seriously and do believe that it would benefit Redeemer College (and other institutions like it) if teachers could somehow be formally "sworn in."

We were not altogether without ceremonies. We had one to install or inaugurate Henry De Bolster as our first president, and another one of the same sort for Justin Cooper, our second president. More recently we had a ceremony for Elaine Botha, our Vice President in charge of academic affairs. We have not held them for any other vice president. And then there are the "full professor" inaugurations. From time to time some member of the faculty ascends to the highest rung. (At Redeemer, as at most North American institutions, there are four ranks: lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, and professor.) In most cases this change in rank to "full professor" is marked with a formal ceremony which includes an address by the professor in question as part of the swearing-in.

What always strikes me about these ceremonies is that they are many years too late. In every case, the prof in question has been holding forth for some time -- perhaps as many as ten years. The College wishes to honor the individuals who have attained this rank; I would prefer instead to place less emphasis on *individuals* and more on the *teaching office* as such.

Therefore I propose that the College add some sort of swearing-in ceremony to its annual fall opening routine -- perhaps the fall convocation would be the best place to fit it in. The first such ceremony would be a bit odd, since the entire faculty would need to be included. Or could we thin the ranks somewhat by saying that tenured professors need not be sworn in? I'm no expert on designing ceremonies, and so I will leave the details for others to ponder. But the general idea, I believe, has the potential to strengthen the College.

I suppose some will say that since we have managed without much overt subscribing or formal initiation ceremony for all these years, we could well continue as we are. Perhaps they are right. We are in effect a common-law professoriate. I am mindful that there are many common-law husbands around, and some of them probably put me to shame in terms of marital diligence. All the same, I would rather be a husband who became a married man through a formal wedding ceremony, a ceremony in which marriage as such was held in

honor (see Hebrews 13:4), and I would rather be a professor through a ceremony that reflects the importance of my teaching office. ***[END]***