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For the Sake of Christian Marriage, Abolish Church Weddings in Africa

Klaus Fiedler

I Introduction

As a pastor and theologian, I am convinced that marriage is one of the basic human institutions of abiding value for all time. As such, it deserves the loving care of the church, a fact emphasized by the special attention Jesus Christ devoted to marriage in his teaching (Mt 19:1–12; Mk 10:1–12).

I am deeply concerned that aspects of the interaction between African traditional culture and Christianity have blocked the application of the biblical message with regard to marriage and have thereby caused significant spiritual and emotional harm to many people. Although my original research on this topic took place in northeast Congo and Kenya, I draw also on information from evangelical churches in East Africa and Malawi as well as from the Roman Catholic Church.

This study¹ examines the interac-

tion between two cultures (and, to some extent, two religions) as they crystallize around the wedding ceremony. Although I do not directly address other family-related issues such as polygamy or divorce, I contend that the discussion of issues surrounding wedding ceremonies in Africa offers important insight into a larger cultural conflict.

The ethnic groups originally dealt with in this essay are all patrilineal. When I moved to Malawi in 1992, I found a country with mostly matrilineal cultures, but much of the argumen-

been updated from the version published as 'For the Sake of Christian Marriage, Abolish Church Weddings' in James L. Cox, ed., *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction between Christian and African Traditional Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1998), 46–60 and under the same title in *Religion in Malawi* 5 (1995), 22–7. My original research on this topic, in 1986–87, was made possible by a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn, and much of the original research is reflected in Klaus Fiedler, *Ganz auf Vertrauen. Geschichte und Kirchenverständnis der Glaubensmissionen* (Giessen and Basel: Brunnen, 1992), 493–9.

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared in 2015 as chapter 1 of Klaus Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity: Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi* (Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2015), 6–21). It had

tation fits patri- and matrilineal societies equally.²

In this essay, I repeatedly make a distinction between theology *talked* and theology *acted*. This differentiation is crucial, and I consider theology *acted* as reality.

II Historical and Theological Background

1. History

The Congolese and Kenyan churches in my case study are the result of the work of interdenominational faith missions, beginning with the China Inland Mission, founded in 1865 by Hudson and Maria Taylor. The Taylors' pressing concern was to reach 'inland' areas of the globe that were still unreached by the gospel. To achieve this end, they were very innovative: ordination was of no importance, lengthy theological training was not required, and women were seen as equal to men and therefore as qualified for independent pioneer missionary work.

Money was not a major obstacle either since the missionaries would trust God that by prayer and faith (hence the nickname 'faith missions') he would supply all their needs. Ecclesiastical differences were downplayed, with the result that Protestant Christians of any denomination could become faith missionaries, provided that they displayed evidence of spirituality and could sign

a basic evangelical creed.³

The first faith mission in Africa was the Livingstone Inland Mission, founded in 1878 by Fanny Guinness in London for pioneer work in the Congo, starting from the mouth of the Congo River.⁴ The major faith missions relevant to this study are the Africa Inland Mission (AIM), founded by Peter Cameron Scott in Philadelphia in 1895, and WEC International, founded by C. T. Studd in Congo in 1913 with his wife Priscilla managing the home base in London.⁵

The main churches resulting from these missions were the Africa Inland Church in Kenya and, in Congo, CECA20 (Communauté Évangélique au Centre de l'Afrique) and CECCA16 (Communauté Évangélique du Christ au Coeur d'Afrique).⁶ These were the pioneer Protestant churches in their respective areas, and their combined

³ I differentiate the faith missions from what I call the 'classical missions'. The classical missions (from 1792 onwards) have their spiritual roots in the Great Awakening, whereas the faith missions have their roots in the Holiness Revival of 1859 (with Grattan Guinness as one of the central figures) and a second wave starting in 1873, in which Dwight L. Moody was the central figure.

⁴ For more details on the faith missions, see Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions from Hudson Taylor to Present-Day Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994). A revised edition is planned for 2017.

⁵ Eileen Vincent, *C. T. Studd and Priscilla: United to Fight for Jesus* (Bromley: STL), 1988.

⁶ During Mobutu's rule, all Protestant churches had, by law, to be part of the Église du Christ au Zaïre. So the mission-founded denominations became *Communautés* of the Église du Christ au Zaïre, and each one had a number, which became part of the commonly used abbreviation.

² Southern Malawi is matrilineal; with the exception of the Sena, the country's central region is matrilineal, whereas the less populated north is mostly patrilineal.

membership can be conservatively estimated as two million people. Their creeds are broadly evangelical, and both missions developed a church polity that is somewhat Presbyterian in administration and somewhat Baptist in sacramental theology.

These churches do not teach any doctrine of the sacraments, but they do have baptisms, communion and weddings. In line with general Protestant conviction, marriage is not officially classified as a sacrament, and in line with Baptist practice, baptism and communion are generally described as divine ordinances rather than sacraments. Although many faith missionaries came from Protestant churches that practised infant baptism, the three churches described here have opted for believers' baptism.

2. The number of sacraments

The faith missionaries were quite clear in recognizing only two sacraments, baptism and communion. Members of the modern churches that have descended from these faith missions are not as clear on this point, however. Members often name marriage and sometimes the dedication of children as sacraments alongside baptism and communion. This increase in popular perception of the number of sacraments was facilitated by the fact that the faith missions rarely taught what a sacrament was and often even did not use the term, referring simply to baptism and communion or the Lord's table.⁷

⁷ In some languages, such as in Kipsigi in Kenya, there is no word for *sacrament* (Bill Reinchild, interview, 16 December 1986).

To many African laypeople, sacraments are solemn rites of the church to which one has to be admitted first and which grant a certain status. According to this yardstick, marriage is a sacrament, and perhaps the highest of all sacraments.

The evangelical churches *teach* that marriage is a civil affair and not a sacrament, but they *behave* in a very different way, according to the initiation of marriage (i.e. the wedding) the highest religious status. This means that there are two different theologies, one *talked* and the other *acted*. I take theology acted as the real one, since it matters in the life of the people.

III Marriage and Wedding Practices in Africa

1. The crucial role of the 'bride price'

Many early missionaries opposed the practice of transferring money or goods to the bride's family as implying the selling of women, but they soon came to acknowledge that this was the established African way of constituting a legal marriage. Therefore, just as many European wedding ceremonies involved the fulfilment of civil requirements (as embodied in the ceremonial question, 'Who giveth away this woman?'), so in (patrilineal) Africa the fulfilment of a civil requirement—the bride price—was expected.

This requirement was not integrated into the liturgy as some European requirements had been, but the bride price was seen as necessary and useful. Within less than a generation of missionary work, a considerable adap-

tation of the Christian theology of marriage to the African cultural context had taken place.

But African culture did not remain static, and changes occurred not only in the amount of bride price expected, but also in its social role and function. Whereas at the turn of the century, in most African societies, the bride price was paid in full (or almost so) in either livestock or labour before the couple began married life, this changed in many societies with the constant rise of the bride price. Many churches attempted to reduce the bride price or at least to slow down its rise, but with very limited success.

Neither in northeast Congo, where I did my initial research in the 1980s, nor in southwest Tanzania, where I lived for seven years, was the man's family expected to pay the full bride price before the marriage. Payment of maybe one-quarter of the total amount would allow them to live together. Completing the payments ten years after the (traditional) wedding was considered a fast performance, and should the wife die before the payments had been completed, the wife's relatives would retain one or more of the children according to the completion rate.

Even more significantly from a cultural and theological perspective, paying the full price before the marriage was neither expected nor desired, because full payment would to some extent free the couple from control by the parents' generation, whereas partial non-payment would extend it.

Since the church insists that the civil requirements of a marriage must be fulfilled, and since the church recognized the payment of the bride price as representing fulfilment of the civil re-

quirements, the church got itself into a fix. Without payment of the bride price, there could be no Christian marriage, but since the bride price would not be fully paid until after the birth of several children, the oldest children of a marriage would be born out of wedlock. Moreover, their parents would live in concubinage and would, as such, be excluded from the sacraments of the church (and thus from divine grace, too, since the sacraments are to convey divine grace).

This situation has occurred in various churches, including both the Roman Catholic Church in south Tanzania and the Africa Inland Church in Kenya, which makes having a church wedding a prerequisite for receiving communion. It explains in part why, when communion is celebrated in the Africa Inland Church, up to 70 percent of the church members and faithful church attenders leave as they are not qualified to participate in the sacrament. CECCA16, on the other hand, does accept a marriage as valid even without the church wedding, as other evangelical churches do, like the Baptists in Malawi.⁸

It is sad that some churches, which in their early days managed so well to adapt to African marriage culture, lost this ability when African culture changed. The Roman Catholic Church does not tie the performance of the sacrament of marriage to the full payment of the bride price, but that is theology

⁸ In CECCA16, participation in communion is also low, because many people who are regular church attenders and (for all practical purposes) good Christians postpone baptism until they consider themselves or are considered by the local church leadership to be worthy of baptism.

talked, not theology *acted*. Even if the priest correctly interprets canon law as not requiring the payment of the bride price (theology *talked*), by agreeing to 'marry' couples who have already been married for 20 years he *teaches* otherwise (theology *acted*).

In popular theology, Christian marriage is understood to be binding for life. Therefore, delaying church weddings gives the impression that the couple is not really married and could still choose to separate. On the other hand, if the church ceremony took place earlier, the husband's family might see no reason to complete the bride price payments. No church *teaches* this, but many churches *live* it. This situation can be remedied only if the church, which was initially successful in incorporating Christian marriage into African culture, manages to disconnect its sacrament of marriage from the full payment of the bride price, since the role of the bride price in African society has changed considerably.

2. The situation in Malawi

When I moved to Malawi in 1992, I found two different family systems: patrilineal (similar to what I observed in Congo and in Kenya, and where the man is the centre of the family structure) and matrilineal, where the woman is at the centre.⁹

The name for a traditional (matrilin-
eal) wedding is *chinkhoswe*, indicating that it is a union of two families. It can take place anywhere, and the crucial moment is the exchange of chicken be-

tween the bridegroom's and the bride's families.¹⁰

In patrilineal northern Malawi, the marriage is constituted by the payment of *lobola* (the bride price), and for the wedding the bride is brought ceremoniously to the homestead of the husband's family.

Both forms of weddings have all the necessary ingredients: the couple's consent, the public event and recognition, and the sexual consummation of the marriage after that.¹¹

Among the matrilineal Chewa, Yao and others, there is no bride price, as the husband moves into the wife's village, and land; house and children are controlled by the wife (and the mother's brother). In matrilineal marriages, women have greater influence and the divorce rate is much higher than in the patrilineal societies of the north. Still, church weddings are usually scarce here as well.

When I married my wife, Rachel NyaGondwe (patrilineal Tumbuka from northern Malawi), in 2001, I checked the marriage register of our Zomba Baptist Church and found that for at least 10 years there had not been a church wedding at the beginning of a marriage, except for one other in which a foreigner was involved. When I checked again 15 years later, I could still hardly find such a wedding. The

¹⁰ The couple's consent is required, but at the *chinkhoswe* of my secretary, that consent was expressed not by the couple, but by the marriage guardians.

¹¹ If such a couple shares a Christian commitment, those elements constitute a Christian marriage, but traditional African ceremonies do not contain a vow of indissolubility, and the church should make provision for one to be included.

⁹ Both systems are nevertheless *patriarchal*, as in *matrilin-
eal* societies the authority of the husband is replaced by the authority of the mother's brother.

cost of the bride price presents the obstacle. In matrilineal societies with no bride price, the expectations for a wedding feast pose a similar financial hurdle.

After Zomba Baptist, we belonged to a semi-urban congregation. Our pastor and his wife had been married properly in a traditional ceremony that was duly announced in and recognized by the church. But he had no church wedding and felt that he could not conduct church weddings without having had one himself. I offered to fix that deficiency by holding a simple ceremony, but he developed it into a big event. I decided that from that time onwards I would not get involved in such 'afterthought' weddings.

One of my students examined a Roman Catholic parish in southern Malawi, finding that among couples who engage in a sacramental marriage, each partner has been in an average of three traditional marriages before that.

The situation is partly different in the middle and upper classes, who have money. Here, weddings at the beginning of a marriage are more frequent, and they offer social recognition and prestige worth the investment. If the church ceremony has a hundred participants, at the reception in the afternoon you may expect six hundred. Those figures show the overwhelmingly social character of a church wedding.

There are a number of pastors (and even sheikhs) who try to shepherd their faithful into large church weddings, which always make nice reading

in the newspapers,¹² but the enthusiasm for such events is limited.

There are differences from church to church, but the overall picture is that weddings at the beginning of a marriage are not the rule, and that their frequency depends heavily on the members' social status and the availability of money.

3. Changing patterns of African marriage: 'marriage by eloping'

The churches require—in good inculturationist style—that civil requirements must be fulfilled for a marriage to be complete. But what constitutes a valid civil marriage in changing African societies?

Because of the high bride prices in many areas (including northeast Congo and Kenya), 'marriage by eloping' has become frequent or even the rule. The churches do not accept this as a form of civil marriage but instead look at it as concubinage, to be punished by exclusion from holy communion. Nevertheless, in actual practice, elopement has become a thoroughly accepted form of civil marriage in northeast Congo. The young man finds his bride by using the traditional go-betweens, then he talks to her. She makes inquiries about the suitor, and when she finally agrees, an evening is fixed for her elopement from home. She is duly received with all honour by the bridegroom's family, and sometimes good food is served too.

¹² In one extreme case, a couple's children arranged, with great pomp, a Presbyterian church wedding for their parents, who were around 90 years old at the time. At the man's funeral, which I attended, this 'wedding' was cited as an important step in his Christian life.

They start to live together. Immediately the bride's family is informed ('don't look for your daughter, she is with us'), so that a date for the bride price negotiations can be set.

This new (and nevertheless thoroughly African) way of getting married could appeal to the churches in at least one aspect, because the consent of the marriage partners plays a prominent role. Such free and voluntary consent, according to the churches' teaching, is one of the most basic components of a proper marriage. But the churches usually view elopement as a sin, to be remedied by a proper wedding (though only low-key since it is a second ceremony), preceded by due repentance from the young couple.

In contrast to the churches' position, neither the young couple nor society sees this new style of getting married as sin, but rather as an efficient way to cut short overly long negotiations and push forward those who are slow to act. The 'repentance' that takes place afterwards is thus largely staged, as people repent of a sin that they don't acknowledge. Here I feel that the churches should react to such marriages with disapproval and counselling, but not with church discipline.

4. The implications of the church wedding (and wedding feast)

The issues described above could be seen as problems resulting from the interaction of African culture with Christianity. But with Christianity came European culture, too. Sometimes Christianity consciously opposed European culture in Africa, sometimes it consciously cooperated with it, and perhaps most often there was an un-

questioned and somewhat naive intermingling between the two.

This intermixing applies to many conceptions connected with Christian weddings in Africa. They have to be in church and in style. And in a young church, isn't it a joy when the first Christian couple is to get married? What male missionary would not take care to ensure that the ceremony is suitably dignified? And what female missionary would not care to ensure that the church's first-ever bride is dressed properly (a bridal veil can easily be made from some curtain material!) and that there is a little reception after the ceremony (which must be a bit impressive too)?

As for the solemnity of the rite, the missionaries themselves set the example. Here is one from the early Congo Balolo Mission:

Christmas Eve dawned a glorious summer day for the wedding of Mr. Fred Gardner and Miss Elizabeth Henson. Preparations began in early morning. The native boys themselves decorated the church most beautifully. After the official State ceremony in French at Basankusu, the Bride and Bridegroom returned to the prettily decorated church at Ikan. Here in Lomongo, English and Lingala¹³ an impressive service was conducted by Mr. F. Anstice before a large congregation. Much interest was aroused amongst the natives when the bridegroom endowed his bride with 'all his worldly goods'. The happy couple left the church

¹³ Lomongo was the local language, Lingala the lingua franca of that part of the Congo, and English the missionaries' language.

amid scenes of rejoicing. A reception was given at Mr. and Mrs Anstice's house later in the day. After four days, the bride and bridegroom returned to Bongandanga. We wish them every blessing in their service for the King.¹⁴

This ceremony was not theology *talked* but theology *acted*, and therefore real and effective theology, which the nascent African church could not help but accept and imitate. In the actual teaching of the faith mission churches, of course, there is no connection whatsoever between the church wedding and the (expensive) feast. However, folk church practice seems to allow no other option. For a church wedding, not only is excellent food required, but also the bridal dress and the bridegroom's suit must be of high quality. In accordance with the solemnity required, special clothes for the bridesmaids, best men, parents and relatives, and maybe transport for all the guests are obligatory as well.

In northeast Congo, such a church wedding could easily cost a quarter or more of the bride price of eight cows, so that one to two years of work were required just to finance the event.¹⁵

Church weddings have become even more a difficult problem for Christian marriage because of another process of change in African society: the grow-

ing extent of social stratification. Most people remain quite poor, but not all. Even in Kenya, where there is much more wealth than in northeast Congo, most people cannot afford a church wedding. Others can, and for them it is a major status symbol, as anyone who looks at the wedding pages in Kenyan newspapers will realize.

Thus, the wedding ceremony has become subject to a naive transfer of western customs to Africa under the guise of a Christian ceremony. Africans usually do not object to the mixing of cultures, and in the church's doctrine there is nothing to oppose it either. So there is no objection to the bridal veil, bridesmaids, special dresses and suits, etc. Nor is there any objection to the church requiring the fulfilment of civil obligations like paying the bride price. The problem is that the church did not treat the wedding ceremony as the blessing of an existing marriage, but as the real thing. Therefore, a marriage without the church ceremony could not be a real marriage, or at least not a real Christian marriage.

The consequence of all this is that, because of either the high bride price or the expensive wedding feast or both, a Christian marriage is out of reach for most Christians, however faithful they might be (unless they are rich in material things).

5. Weddings as a means of religious stratification

The wide variation in ability to afford a church wedding is the result of social stratification, combined with the high cost of what tradition has defined as an appropriate wedding ceremony. But a perhaps more important proc-

¹⁴ Congo Mission News/Nouvelles Missionnaires du Congo 98 (an internal newsletter of the Protestant missions in the Congo), about 1908.

¹⁵ David Langford, 'Areas of Pastoral Concern: Marriage' (unpublished manuscript, 1985), 8; another interviewee estimated that a year of work would be required (Donald Muchmore, interview, 30 December 1986).

ess of stratification takes place within the church in those cases where the church requires a church wedding as a precondition either for full membership or for the acquisition of special graces.

The Africa Inland Church, Roman Catholic Church and others make the church wedding a precondition for receiving the sacraments. This includes, for Catholics, even the sacrament of confession. In the Catholic Church, baptism is easy to obtain. Most people receive it without even asking for it. In CECCA16, CECA20 and the Africa Inland Church, all of which do not baptize infants, baptism also is easy to obtain, though the precondition is the experience of a genuine conversion. The reason is that this requirement is theology *talked*, not theology *acted*. In practice, the profession of a conversion is sufficient to gain admittance for baptismal instruction. Regular attendance then qualifies one for baptism, which is being administered to ever younger children.¹⁶ This is a definite change from the earlier practice of making admission to baptism difficult.¹⁷

Admission to communion is more difficult to obtain. Here again the Roman Catholic Church is the leader, seeming content to have the vast majority of young and middle-aged adults

barred from the sacrament. In some faith mission churches, admission to communion is proof of a 'proper' married life (though the specific conditions for a proper married life vary greatly between churches). On the other hand, even church members in good standing often do not partake in communion, because of what I call 'fear of the sacrament'.¹⁸

Ironically, as noted previously, the highest sacrament of all for many in Africa is the church wedding, though in Protestant theology it is no sacrament at all. It is far more solemn than baptism and more difficult to attain than communion. Its preconditions include not only baptism and the right to share in the Lord's table, but also the fulfilment of all civil requirements for a marriage. Those who can achieve or afford it are in the upper strata of religious society.

This distinction is made clear in CECCA16, for example. There you don't need a church wedding for communion, but you need it for ordination. In the Africa Inland Church in western Kenya, an experienced Sunday school leader was nominated to become a church elder but could not accept the position because he had never had a church wedding. A Baptist pastor told me of a similar case from the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian in Malawi:

My cousin, a Presbyterian, wanted

¹⁶ In theology *talked*, the youngest age for baptism was always around 12 years, quite in conformity with Baptist practice in many Western countries, but in theology *acted*, the baptized can be as young as 6 years.

¹⁷ This was clearly the case in the early Africa Inland Mission, but not in the very early WEC missionary work in Congo. Even in that instance, though, the practice of baptism very soon after conversion (or 'baptism on demand') was soon changed because of bad experiences with quick baptism.

¹⁸ This fear is not clearly defined, but it may be expressed as a feeling of not being 'worthy'. In Malawi, in both Presbyterian and Baptist contexts, women frequently do not participate in communion because they are menstruating. For a Presbyterian treatment of the issue, see Felix L. Chingota, 'Sacraments and Sexuality', *Religion in Malawi* 8 (1998), 34–40.

to become a church deacon. But he had to have a church wedding first. To have a church wedding without the appropriate wedding feast would have been a shame. The wedding feast finally would cost 5,000 Kwachas [about 17 months' pay for a civil servant at that time]. He had to postpone having it because he could not find the money in time. Now he is a deacon, after having had a church wedding.

The attitude that a church wedding is needed for certain offices in the church creates religious stratification. It is not easy to afford a church wedding, so there must be a reward, like the office of deacon or elder. The highest reward is ordination, and there can be no ordination without a church wedding in most churches.

Another way in which religious stratification is effected by church weddings involves the right to perform them. In the Africa Inland Church in Kenya, there is a distinction between licensed and ordained pastors. Licensing, usually a temporary measure, has become a permanent feature in the Africa Inland Church, with at least two-thirds of the pastors never achieving ordination. Both licensed and ordained ministers are allowed to administer baptism and communion, but only an ordained minister can conduct a church wedding.¹⁹ For many years a whole district of the AIC with 18 congregations was without a single ordained pastor,

and if anyone wanted to have a church wedding, he also had to pay for the cost of importing an ordained pastor into this somewhat remote district.

Stratification through church weddings permits differentiation between a higher and a lower set of clergy.²⁰ This differentiation is very much at variance with the earlier practice of the faith mission churches, which paid scant attention to ordination.²¹ The missions had introduced this differentiation by employing large numbers of 'evangelists' and later by granting ordination to a very small number among them. The independent Africa Inland Church simply carried this differentiation into the ranks of the ministers. It can be argued that the AIC just followed the mission's *acted* theology.

Similar distinctions have been made by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, which in its Northern Diocese permitted senior evangelists (who were de facto pastors of a congregation) to administer the sacraments. When I inquired as to the difference between such an 'evangelist of the synod' and a minister, the reply was that 'the evangelists of the synod are not allowed to perform marriages'. In the Assemblies of God in Malawi, ordained ministers 'are permitted to perform all ordinances and ceremonies of the church', whereas licensed ministers may 'perform all ordinances and ceremonies of the church except the

¹⁹ Sometimes it is claimed that this must be so since only ordained ministers can be registered as 'marriage officers' of the government. This view is not correct. Government does not look for ordination, but only for endorsement by the church.

²⁰ It also seems to reduce the number of claimants on the material benefits that derive from performing weddings.

²¹ In the Africa Inland Mission, for example, every male missionary, ordained or not, was accorded full sacramental rights.

marriage ceremony'.²²

All this tells me that in these Protestant churches, in theology *acted*, the church wedding is the highest sacrament.

If the church wedding can be likened to the source of the river of Christian marriage, then this source is speedily drying up. Many years ago, the church wedding was the norm in northeast Congo; by the 1980s it had become a rare event. In Kisangani Congregation (formerly Unevangelized Fields Mission, an offshoot of WEC) there had not been a church wedding for 10 years,²³ and in the northern CECA20 territory there were practically none.²⁴ The southern area around Oicha had church weddings in about half of all cases, but even there the frequency was declining.²⁵ In CECCA16, the number of church weddings was low, but a church wedding is not required there. The same is the case with the Baptists in Malawi.²⁶

22 Assemblies of God in Malawi, Constitution and By-Laws, revised August 1990, Article 5, Section 1.

23 Even a legend helps to legitimize the neglect of church weddings. The legend claims that many years ago there was a church wedding, and the bride ran away from her husband that very night. After that, no church wedding ever took place, because it was regarded as a bad omen for the success of a marriage (Hilde Moro, interview, 5 January 1987).

24 Langford, 'Areas of Pastoral Concern', 8; Rev Ang'apoza Etsea Kila, interview, 30 December 1986.

25 Rev Musangura Mbafefe-Mussamba, interview, 3 January 1987.

26 I asked a Baptist pastor from Blantyre if in his church a church wedding was required. 'No', he said, 'but then it's not a Christian marriage.' 'How frequent are church weddings?' I asked. 'There are a few—not in my church

The need today is even greater today than when I first wrote this essay. Over the last 20 years, many have referred to my views, but I am not aware that they have had any positive influence on church practice. Meanwhile, the cleavage between marriage and weddings has grown wider, church weddings have become more expensive (at least for the middle class) and bridal showers (or 'marriage send-offs') have become more elaborate and an almost compulsory part of church weddings, making them even more expensive (and probably less Christian).²⁷

Does this mean that all those who have had no church wedding do not lead a Christian married life? Protestant theology *talked* would not agree to this conclusion, nor would honest observation support it. Having a church wedding these days is less a matter of Christian quality than of secular Kwachas (or shillings, Meticaïs or Rands, depending on the country).

This scarcity of church weddings has resulted from the fateful interaction of three cultures (Christian, European, African) and the churches' decision to link their moral standards to waning aspects of African culture like the payment of the bride price *before* marriage. If it is the church's duty to adapt to African culture, it must also be willing to adapt to changes in that same African culture. Therefore, the churches should take new forms of

alone, but a few in all the churches in Blantyre.'

27 For a study of bridal showers and related practices, see Towera Mwase, 'The Marriage Instructions for Girls and Women in Mzuzu Churches', M.A. thesis, Mzuzu University, 2012.

African marriage as seriously as they took the old forms.

Inculturation cannot be achieved once and forever. It must be a dynamic process by which the churches continually seek to connect the eternal gospel in a meaningful way to the processes of social change.

6. The loss of Christian values

The churches' marriage policies have led to the loss of several Christian values. First, the value of Christian marriage was lost. By placing a high value on Christian marriage (through an emphasis on the need for a church wedding) in theology *talked*, the churches kept many (often most) of the marriages of their members out of the reach of Christian influence. This situation is not in accord with the New Testament's view of Christian marriage or of the important role of marriage in African culture.

The Christian value of honesty has also been lost. A church's emphasis on something that is hard to achieve (the wedding ceremony after payment of the full bride price) causes people to repent of sins that they do not feel they have committed. Furthermore, there is good reason to accuse the churches of materialism, since they make an expensive enterprise a cornerstone of spiritual achievement. The conveyance of spiritual graces is conditional on material achievements.

The different churches, to varying degrees, have accepted the fact that their rite or sacrament of marriage has been turned from a means to convey God's grace at the beginning of the marital journey into a reward for high achievers. Having a church

wedding has become a status symbol for the laity, and for the clergy it is a major element in ecclesiastical power structures. The theology *talked* is very spiritual, but the theology *acted* is very secular.

This contradiction, though not unknown in America or Europe, has been greatly aggravated by interaction (on different levels) between Christianity and the changing African culture. I deeply regret that the churches have been either unable or unwilling to remedy this confused situation.

IV A Proposal for a New Process of Inculturation

When the early missionaries accepted the bride price as an institution compatible with the values of Christian marriage, they adapted church practice to African culture effectively in this regard (in contrast to other areas, beyond the scope of this paper, where they were less successful). But many churches stopped the process of inculturation when the social situation affecting marriages changed. The present situation has become a process of adverse inculturation. The church wedding as an exquisite event has been absorbed into the wealthy segments of secular African culture.²⁸

I claim that a new process of inculturation is needed, one that takes

²⁸ This situation can be compared with that in Germany, where the church wedding has become part of secular society in the same way as confirmation and Christmas Eve church attendance. Churches otherwise quite empty are full on Christmas Eve, not because of a sudden upsurge of spiritual desires but 'because it's so romantic'.

African marriage as seriously today as was done a hundred years ago with the then-current African marriage patterns.

Such a process of inculturation must consciously make room for social change. Christianity cannot just relate to African culture at one point in time, but at *any* point in time.

Inculturation of the gospel does not mean giving in to African culture (or any culture) in all things; on the contrary, it may mean conflict for the sake of the gospel.

I am convinced that, for the sake of Christian marriage, and for the sake of millions of Christian Africans who want to live a Christian married life, something must be done, and quickly. I would like to propose the following steps.

1. Since the New Testament says a great amount about Christian marriage but shows no concern whatsoever for church weddings, I conclude that a church wedding is not needed to make a Christian marriage.²⁹
2. The church must take folk theology seriously and must accept that, although in theology *talked* there is no need for a feast to follow the church wedding, in *practice* the feast has become an integral part of the ceremony.
3. The churches must admit that attempts to keep the bride price low

by means of church legislation have met with no success.

4. Therefore, the churches should accept any genuine African marriage as a valid marriage. This would be real inculturation.
5. The church wedding is not a constituent part of the Christian faith, nor was it an integral part of African culture. Therefore, the church should abolish the church wedding.

If abolishing church weddings completely is perceived as too rigid, two things at least should be implemented: no 'weddings' after years of marriage, and no connection between having a church wedding and admission to the sacraments or to ordination.

In the process of realistic inculturation, the church must not shy away from conflict for the sake of the gospel. There will be a loud outcry from a few elite members of society, but should the church, with its 'preferential option for the poor', give preference to the few wealthy achievers and provide them with a semi-secular ceremony to crown their achievements, or should it be more concerned with the many poor people who already had to abolish church weddings for financial reasons? In keeping the church wedding as the standard, the church pleases the few and burdens the many.

Some might argue that abolishing church weddings would have two less desirable side effects: the young couple would be given no chance to make their commitment to Christian marriage public, nor would there be any possibility of publicly asking God to bless the marriage. But even if church weddings are abolished, these provisions could be made, perhaps along the lines of the 'marriage prayer' (*malombi ya mar-*

²⁹ This is in conformity with general Protestant dogmatics. Even for Catholics, for whom marriage is a sacrament, there is no need for a church wedding, since it is not the priest who administers the sacrament of marriage, but the bride and bridegroom administer it to each other.

riage) practised in CECA20 (as stated in its constitution) and some other churches. It is usually applied to couples who have eloped but who want, after having settled their marriage with the families concerned, to return into the full fellowship of their church.³⁰

For this marriage prayer, the pastor visits the couple, reads the relevant Scripture passages to them, and prays for them. Then usually some food is served. In theological terms, such a blessing of a marriage contains everything required, and the cost factor is negligible. But the fact that this marriage prayer takes place only in the house, not in the church, shows that it is second-class. And it will remain second-class as long as 'real' marriages are celebrated in church, as infrequently as that may be.

Actually, there is no need for the pastor to come to the house for the marriage prayer. Two or four elders

could be chosen for this ceremony. Possibly half of these should be female elders, so that they would not only act as prayer leaders but also play a role similar to that of the marriage guardians present in some African societies, such as the Chagga on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro.

I am looking forward to that day when no African man will refer to his wife of more than 20 years as his fiancée (*mchumba*) because they have not yet 'been married' (in church).

I am looking forward to the day when no pastor will be asked to 'marry' a couple with their five grown children present.

I am looking forward to the day when no one will have to spend thousands of Kwachas to become a deacon.

And I am looking forward to the day when the church does everything in its power to help married couples to *live* Christian marriages, through teaching, seminars, counselling, preaching and other means.

30 Langford, 'Areas of Pastoral Concern', 10.