

“Who Gives This Woman to Be Married to This Man?” Implications of a Question

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ABSTRACT. In recent years the part of the marriage ceremony where the bride was to promise to “obey” her future husband has been removed. However, the part of the ceremony referred to as “the giving away of the bride” remains. This question implies that a transfer of property in the form of the bride is occurring from the bride’s parents to the groom. The question is demeaning and implies patriarchy—the subordination and subjection of women to men. This article examines this question in the light of patriarchy historically and currently and suggests alternatives to this part of the contemporary marriage rite. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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The bridesmaids have processed down the center aisle of the nave and are taking their positions in the front of the church opposite the row of groomsmen. The groom anxiously waits by the front pew for his bride. The organ breaks forth in the traditional wedding march as the bride begins her walk down the aisle on the arm of her father. As the bride and her father reach the front of the church, the officiant begins the ceremony with a question, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” The bride’s father responds “Her mother and I.”

Wedding ceremonies and the events surrounding them are rich in tradition. The source of some of these traditions is difficult to deter-

mine while others are more obvious. Some wedding traditions are relatively harmless; others are not.

- Historically brides wore a veil as a way of staving off evil spirits. Often the veil was red as a symbol of defiance against evil spirits. Martha Washington's daughter is reported to be the first bride to wear a white lace veil because supposedly her fiance commented about her beauty as she stood behind a lace window curtain.
- A white bridal dress was originally meant to symbolize the virgin bride's innocence and modesty.
- Wedding rings date back to ancient times when a groom would braid circles of grass to wrap around his bride's wrists and ankles believing this would keep her spirit from exiting her body. Over time these circles evolved into leather, carved stone, metal and eventually into silver and gold rings.
- The bride standing at the groom's left (except in Jewish ceremonies) is supposed to have originated in the days when the groom captured his bride. Since most grooms are right-handed, having his bride at his left side freed his right arm to use his sword in the event he had to protect his bride from an attack.¹

While these traditions are relatively harmless and perhaps even humorous, some wedding traditions are not so. Until recent years brides were expected to pledge obedience to their husbands as part of the marriage ceremony vows. This tradition, that placed a woman in a subservient position to her husband, has disappeared from most wedding rites. However, a similar tradition continues in many ceremonies. This is the question that the officiant asks of the bride's father or parents at the opening of the wedding ceremony, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

This question implies that a transfer of property is about to occur. The bride's father or parents are transferring property in the form of their daughter from themselves to the groom. Thus, this aspect of the marriage rite is often referred to as "the giving away of the bride." It is interesting to note that this question is asked only of the bride's parents, not of the groom's. The serious and harmful implications of this aspect of the wedding rite must be understood from the perspective of patriarchy.

PATRIARCHY HISTORICALLY

Patriarchy is a cultural belief system that supports men having power and control over women. In its most extreme forms it views women as the property of men.²

Patriarchy is woven into the fabric of history going back to Biblical times, as seen in the subordination and even the abuse of women. In Deuteronomy (25: 11,12) the community is instructed to cut off a wife's hand if she tries to help her husband, when he is involved in a skirmish with another man, by grabbing hold of his opponent's genitals. Old Testament passages exhorted men to stone a prospective bride who could not prove her virginity (Deuteronomy 22: 20,21). Passages from Pauline epistles, when not viewed in their historical context, would suggest that women should be subject to their husbands (Ephesians 5).

The Roman legal principle of *patri potestas* allowed for a man to sell, disfigure or kill his wife and children at will. Gratian, in the 12th century in the *Decretum*, the first systematic document of church law, emphasized that women were not made in the image of God. Gratian asserted that since a woman led man into wrongdoing in the Fall, a man should keep a woman under his direction lest he is led astray again.³

A wife became a "femme covert" under feudal law in England that placed her under the protection and cover of her husband. This doctrine of coverture made the husband legally responsible for his wife's behavior, restricted her in her ability to own and manage property or to sue or be sued. This document had a significant impact on the role of women in relation to men as well as their role in society in general, vestiges of which still remain today. It was not until the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts in England in 1882 that women were allowed to own property of their own and were no longer regarded as the property of their husband.

Any threat to a husband's authority warranted correction and even punishment. St. Augustine wrote that for peace to occur in the home, it was necessary that those in authority rule those who were subordinate. This included masters their servants, parents their children, and husbands their wives. Augustine indicated that if disobedience did occur, an appropriate and just punishment would be verbal and physical correction. This treatment in part stemmed from the fact that women

were viewed as leading humanity into sin in the Garden of Eden. These statements reflect the insidious effects of patriarchy or the subordination of women; namely, the beating of women.

British Common Law attempted to control the extent to which men could beat their wives by imposing the “rule of the thumb,” which stated that the instrument a man used for beating his wife could be “a rod not thicker than this thumb.” Although this rule was intended to protect a woman from severe beatings, it in essence gave a man license to beat his wife.⁴

In 1824 a law was passed in Mississippi that gave husbands immunity from prosecution if they physically assaulted their wives. The subordinate position of women to men, a socially constructed phenomenon, however often was viewed as divinely ordained. The Puritan wife, as literature reflects, was considered the weaker vessel in both body and mind, and husbands were exhorted that they should not expect too much from them.⁵ In the antebellum South, there were certainly great differences between the white planter’s wife and his female slaves, yet they were alike in one way in that he owned them both—they were the planter’s property.⁶

In early American history, several states adopted laws prescribing the extent to which punishment could be meted out to men who beat their wives; however, in some instances, such as in Pennsylvania, an attempt to pass a law in 1886 forbidding wife beating failed to pass the legislature. As late as 1910, the Supreme Court ruled in a case that a wife did not have cause for action on an assault and battery charge against her husband. The Court felt such a ruling would open the doors of the courts to accusations of all sorts of one partner against the other and bring into public notice complaints for assault, slander, and libel.⁷

Pagelow and Johnson, in their chapter entitled, “Abuse in the American Family: The Role of Religion,” in the book *Abuse and Religion*, discuss how the church reinforced the ideals of the state in the subordination of women:

The church and the state joined forces to support husband’s dominance and wife’s submission, and the writing of Martin Luther, John Knox, and John Calvin, leaders of Christian splinter groups, strongly reinforced that heritage (Davidson, 1977; Dobash and Dobash, 1979). The founder of the Lutheran church, who admitted “boxing” his wife’s ear when she got “saucy,” compared women to a nail driven into the wall and said, “The rule remains

with the husband and the wife is compelled to obey him by God's command" (Luther, cited in Bussert, 1986, p.11). Bussert also quotes Calvin's response to an abused wife that, except when she might be killed, she must "bear with patience the cross which God has seen fit to place upon her; and meanwhile not to deviate from the duty which she has before God to please her husband, but to be faithful whatever happens" (1986, p.12).⁸

PATRIARCHY CURRENTLY

Patriarchy can still be found in Christian denominations today. A major Protestant denomination at their national convention in 1998 passed a rather ambiguous statement calling for equality in marital partners while at the same time admonishing a wife "to submit" to her husband.

The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.⁹

Lest one think that patriarchy is merely a concept and not carried out in actual practice, a popular television talk show recently featured five men who openly discussed the power and control they had over their spouses. The men ruled their home like tyrants. These husbands did not allow their wives to work outside the home and they insisted they be informed at work whenever their wife and children were leaving the family home, even to just go to a grocery store. The men accompanied their wives on shopping trips and the wives could not buy an item of clothing unless it met their approval. When confronted by audience members for their controlling attitude toward their spouses, the men unashamedly spoke of "owning" their wives. They

used the analogy that just as they owned their automobile and had a title to document ownership, so they “owned” their wives and their marriage license was the document supporting their ownership. One wonders what happened to the wives when any infraction of their husband’s control occurred.

While this example might be somewhat extreme, the effects of patriarchy or the subordination of women are still evident in American society. Patriarchy can be seen, for example, in the economic and political arenas where men dominate in commerce and in the formulation of public policy, and women are relatively powerless. The powerless status of women is also seen in the workplace in terms of comparable worth, whereby males and females may do work requiring comparable skills and responsibility under similar working conditions, but women will not necessarily receive equal pay. The church also is not exempt from patriarchy or the subordinate position in which women are placed as seen in their absence or scarcity in numbers in the ranks of clergy across denominations, in positions of authority in congregations, and in denominational hierarchies.

The effects of patriarchy in American society can also be seen in spouse abuse. Over 2,000 shelters have been established throughout the United States where women can seek protection from an abusive mate. It is estimated that over 2 million women are annually abused by a partner and that 50% of all women will be victims of battering at some time in their life.¹⁰ Once a woman has been victimized by domestic violence, her risk of being revictimized is high. There are at least 4 million reported incidents of domestic violence against women every year. However, nearly half of all incidents of violence against women are not reported to the police. A woman in the United States is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a male partner than by any other type of assailant. Between 15% and 24% of pregnant women are battered.¹¹ It is estimated that four women are killed every day by their intimate partners in the context of a domestic dispute.¹² Some of the highest rates of marital violence are found among military men.¹³

Marital rape—the ultimate subjection of women—or the demand by a husband for sex from his wife whenever he wants it and how he wants it, is not even regarded by some as a violation of the wife’s rights. Research has found that men and women subscribing to traditional patriarchal views of society and traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs tend to support forced marital intercourse.¹⁴ A mail survey of 1,300

Texas residents found that 65% of the respondents did not believe a wife had the right to accuse her husband of rape. Rather, they felt it was her obligation and duty as part of the marriage to submit to her husband's sexual wishes.¹⁵

REMOVING THE QUESTION

In recent years the bride vowing to "obey" her husband has been removed from most wedding ceremonies because of the subordinate position in which the vow placed the woman to her husband. The time has come also for the removal of the traditional "giving away of the bride" part of the marriage ceremony because of the patriarchal implications of this tradition. The question demeans women. A survey by the author of the official wedding rites of major Protestant denominations reveals the question remains in many of these publications; however, some clergy are quick to point out that they avoid addressing the question only to the bride's parents.

How might this aspect of the wedding ceremony be changed? The question asking who presents the bride for marriage can be eliminated from the marriage ceremony, together with references to the Ephesians passage exhorting a woman to submit to her husband. The elimination of this question makes sense in the light of the independence from parents of most young couples entering marriage. Relatively infrequently is the bride living at home with her parents at the time of the marriage. More likely she is living independently or cohabiting with her prospective husband. (One can be certain the groom did not ask his prospective father-in-law to "give" his daughter to him when they began cohabiting so why should the father or parents now at the time of the wedding be asked to "give" their daughter to their prospective son-in-law.)

An alternative solution to the problem is to follow a custom prevalent in some European churches where the bride and groom process down the aisle together often followed by their parents. With this arrangement, the groom can meet the bride at the church door or together come from their home to the church. This removes the rather foolish superstition that the groom should not see the bride on their wedding day until she enters the church. One of the most important days of the young couple's life, but yet they are not to see each other on that day until she enters the church? This custom becomes almost

humorous when most people are aware that the bride and groom have been living together for the past months, including the night before the wedding. The bridal couple entering the church together, however, eliminates the father escorting his daughter down the aisle.

If the bride insists upon being escorted into the church on the arm of her father, then a question asked by the officiant should be directed to both sets of parents. The question addressed to the bride's parent might be: "Who presents this bride for marriage?" Similarly then the question should be addressed to the groom's parents, "Who presents this groom for marriage?" The *Book of Common Worship*, used frequently in Presbyterian churches, suggests that the minister address the parents of both the bride and groom with the following question: "Do you (both parent's names) give your blessing to (names of bride and groom), and promise to do everything in your power to uphold them in their marriage?" Each set of parents responds: "We give our blessing and promise our support."¹⁶ This question prevents placing the bride in the position of property that is being transferred to the groom. Conversely, the question requests the support of both sets of parents for the new union that is about to be formed. Changing the wedding rite in this way suggests that the children of these two unions are now uniting to form their own union. The popular custom of lighting a unity candle reinforces this view. The bride and groom light a new candle with flames taken from candles representing their respective families, thereby symbolically beginning a new family.

The elimination of the "giving away of the bride" portion of the wedding ceremony presents an excellent opportunity for officiating clergy in prenuptial sessions to discuss with the couple the nature of an egalitarian relationship in a marriage. The role of the husband in such a relationship is not "the head of the house" nor is the wife "to be subject" to him. Rather, in an egalitarian relationship, together the couple shares in the responsibilities, decisions, and tasks that marriage presents. The elimination of "the giving away of the bride" places women in their rightful position—as equal partners to men not only in a brief wedding ceremony but also throughout their married life.

SUMMARY

As in recent years a bride vowing to "obey" her husband has been removed from marriage rites, so the time has come to remove the part

of the wedding ceremony referred to as “the giving away of the bride.” This aspect of the ceremony demeans a woman by placing her in the context of property owned by her family and being transferred to the groom. Clergy officiating at weddings can assume leadership in avoiding this aspect of the marriage rite when counseling with couples about to be married by suggesting alternatives to the traditional question: “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” Alternatives include eliminating the question or addressing a question to the bride and groom’s parents asking for their blessing and support of the young couple about to be married. Or, the bridal couple may also wish to approach the front of the church together, rather than the bride being escorted on the arm of her father, especially if the bridal couple has been cohabiting. These alternative arrangements suggest a marriage in which an egalitarian relationship will pervade rather than one partner being in control and the other being subservient.

NOTES

1. See, for example, J. Ansastasio and M. Bevilacqua, *The Wedding Book*, 2nd ed. (Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corp., 1999).

2. See, for example, R. E. Dobash and R.P. Dobash, *Violence against Wives: A Case against Patriarchy* (New York: Free Press, 1979). V. Wiehe, *Understanding Family Violence: Treating and Preventing Partner, Child, Sibling, and Elder Abuse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998).

3. Dobash and Dobash, *op.cit.*

4. See, for example, T. Davidson, “Wifebeating: A Recurring Phenomenon Throughout History.” In M. Roy (ed.), *Battered Women: A Psychosociological Study* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977) 2-23.

5. L. Ulrich, “Virtuous Women Found.” In N. Cott & E. Peck (eds.), *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1979) 58-80.

6. L. Carr and L. Walsh, “The Planter’s Wife: The Experiences of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland.” In Cott & Peck, *op. cit.* 25-57.

7. For a discussion of the historical perspective of patriarchy, see for example, Maria Roy, *Battered Women: A Psychosociological Study of Domestic Violence*, *op. cit.* Dobash and Dobash, *op. cit.*

8. M. Pagelow and P. Johnson, “Abuse in the American Family: The Role of Religion.” In A. Horton and J. Williamson, *Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn’t Enough* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988) 8.

9. Report of Committee on Baptist Faith and Message, p 2. <<http://www.utm.edu/martinarea/fbc/fbm/report1998.html>>

10. L. Walker, *Abused Women and Survivor Therapy: A Practice Guide for the Psychotherapist* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 1994).

11. See, for example, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Family Violence* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1995, August). National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, P.O. Box 18749, Denver, CO 80218.

12. K. Stout, "Intimate Femicide: A Demographic Overview," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 6 (1991) 476-485.

13. C. Cronin, "Adolescents' Reports of Parental Spousal Violence in Military and Civilian Families," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 10 (1995) 117-122.

14. C. Jefford, "The Impact of Sex-Role and Religious Attitudes Upon Forced Marital Intercourse Norms." *Sex Role* 11 (1984) 543-552.

15. C. Jeffords and R. Dull, "Demographic Variations in Attitudes Toward Marital Rape Immunity," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 44 (1982) 755-762.

16. *Book of Common Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. P. 844.

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