

# Go Ahead and Skip That Temple Wedding

by Rock Waterman | May 19, 2013 | Featured, Mormonism, Temple | 33 comments



**Note:**

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## GO AHEAD AND SKIP THAT TEMPLE WEDDING

by Rock Waterman

I'm not normally in the habit of telling other people what they should or should not do, but this is the time of year when a lot of young LDS couples get engaged and start nailing down their wedding plans for the spring. So I'm going to go out on a limb here and offer some valuable counsel to the youth of the church. Here it is:

Don't get married in the temple.

By all means, get yourselves sealed in the temple, especially if you lovebirds plan to stick it out for time and all eternity. But before you get sealed, do what the early latter-day Saints always did: get married first. Don't confuse getting sealed with getting married. The sealing is a priesthood ordinance, while a wedding is -and was always meant to be- a public celebration of your union.

Somewhere down the line, we Mormons began conflating these two events into one. Exactly how and why that occurred makes an interesting and convoluted tale. For, hard as it may be to accept after decades of conditioning to the contrary, the idea that Mormons should be married openly and in a public place, with all their friends and family present, is a position firmly rooted in doctrine.

Whereas on the other hand, the common credenda that if a couple doesn't get married in the temple first, they are somehow less worthy or lacking in the faith, is a recent tradition only a few decades old and wholly unsupported by scripture.

To Conjoin a wedding with a sealing makes about as much sense as conflating a birthday party with a baptism. When a child in this church turns eight years old, family and friends usually get together to celebrate the big day. It is, after all, a milestone; for now the child is of baptismal age.

But no one would think to bilk that eight-year-old out of his birthday party, rush him to the baptismal font, dunk him, and exclaim, "Well, kid, there's your big day!"

There is a relationship between the two events, yes, but they are not one and the same.

At least they didn't used to be.

### **The Official Original Mormon Rules For Marriage**

In the early years of this church, all weddings took place in the open where friends and family members were welcome, including all the little brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews. No one was excluded. Weddings in Mormonland were pretty much the same as weddings anywhere else in the country, and not much different than weddings anywhere and everywhere throughout recorded history.

It was of such importance to Joseph Smith that weddings not be held in secret that the policy was codified in the Doctrine and Covenants:

"All marriages in this church of Christ of Latter Day Saints," the scripture stated, "should be

solemnized in a **public meeting, or feast**, prepared for this purpose..."

"...The persons to be married," are to be "**standing together**, the man on the right, and the woman on the left..." (Emphasis mine.)

That was the first part of what became known as the church's Rules for Marriage. They were first presented at a general conference in 1835 and voted on by the whole membership. Joseph Smith, who had been preaching in Michigan and therefore not present at the conference, later approved the Rules for inclusion in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, as part of section 109. Seven years later, the prophet had the Rules reprinted in Nauvoo's paper of record, *The Times and Seasons*, so there could be no question of his position on the matter. That was in 1842.

But after Joseph Smith's death, Brigham Young changed the rules, and it's still unclear by what authority he did so. Brigham Young admitted to not being a prophet (JD 5:77), and no one in the church during his lifetime referred to him as "the Prophet." He was the president.

Before the Saints uprooted and headed west, President Young took to presiding over a handful of secret marriages in the Nauvoo temple. Usually "the happy couple" wasn't even a couple. In most of those cases the bride and groom -almost always some high ranking leader in the church hierarchy- were already married, their "real" wedding having taken place earlier in church like most everyone else's.

What was usually happening in these temple ceremonies was that President Young was marrying the bride and groom...to the groom's new girlfriend. It was necessary to conduct such marriages secretly because the practice that would one day become known as *The Principle* had not yet been made known to the church membership at large. Also, there was a little matter of The Happy Triple running afoul of state and federal bigamy laws if the *menage a trois* was openly discovered. Best to keep it on the down-low for the time being.

After polygamy was abolished, many Mormons, particularly in Utah, continued the tradition of having temple marriages, although it was by no means rare to get married outside the temple first, particularly by the 1940's and '50's when the church was gaining a great many new converts.

Very few of these converts would have considered excluding their non-member family and friends from sharing in their joy, even if they were worthy to enter the temple, so Mormon church weddings or weddings conducted by a Justice of the Peace were often the norm back then. My mother, a Utah farm girl from Mapleton, married my father, a California based Marine, in a ceremony where his non-member parents were present and his marine buddies attended in their full dress blues.

My parents were both worthy to enter the temple at the time (the Los Angeles temple was only an hour away), but they opted to have all their friends and family present at the wedding. There was no shame in that option at the time. My grandparents also had a church wedding first with family and friends in attendance. Depending upon your age, it's very likely your own parents or grandparents had a public wedding before heading to the temple to have that marriage sealed.

Back then, not many members thought it odd when an active LDS couple chose not to have their wedding take place in the temple, if it meant family and friends would be excluded from sharing in the moment. They could always go and get sealed in the temple later. Few people thought there was anything wrong with them simply because they chose a church wedding first.

## Blame It On Austin Powers

As the 1960's unfolded, American and European society increasingly promoted sexual promiscuity among the young. The Church responded to this onslaught by teaching the youth the importance of keeping oneself unspotted from the sins of the world. To assist in giving the young people something to aim for, a tangible goal was presented. That goal was for every young man and young woman to so conduct themselves that they would at all times be found to be "temple worthy."

Mormon boys were taught that if they lived sufficiently chaste and virtuous lives (and served an honorable mission), they would one day be eligible to take a lovely young woman to the temple to there be wed for time and all eternity.

Young LDS girls were reminded to continually guard their virtue, and live so that one day they would be a worthy mate for a fine young man who would take them inside that glorious place to live together for eternity.

Within two or three generations, a sacred sealing ordinance that was meant to bind in heaven what had been bound on earth, had been converted in the minds of most members of the church into the only legitimate wedding ceremony a devout Mormon should ever consider.



This completely laudable goal of raising chaste and conscientious young men and women has, over the years, resulted in at least two unforeseen and unintended consequences.

1. Those members of the church who were married in the temple could hardly help passing silent judgment on those who, for whatever reason, were not. Those who chose a church or civil marriage came to be seen as something akin to second-class members, persons who were somehow weak, or lacking in the faith.
2. The false idea was inadvertently nurtured in the imagination of many a young Mormon girl from a very early age, that if she kept herself worthy, one day an equally worthy returned missionary (the ultimate in handsome manliness) would sweep her up like prince charming and carry her to the temple which was, in her imagination, a magic fairy castle where she would be dressed as a princess and celebrated by all within on the glorious day of her wedding. And then, as a reward for a lifetime of continence, she would live the rest of her life happily ever after with all her dreams fulfilled.

To any young girl whose fantasies resemble even a portion of that description, forgive me while I disabuse you of your illusions.

If you thought your temple wedding was going to resemble in any way the wedding of your girlhood dreams, you are in for a sore awakening. The temple is not the place for your fantasy wedding. It has been more accurately described as "a wedding factory."

Some time after your arrival at the temple, you will discover that you are not going to be the special bride that day. You will be waiting in a room with about a dozen or more other girls who have also come to be married. If the line of bridal candidates gets backed up, you'll be lucky if they give you twenty minutes.

That beautiful wedding dress you spent so much time and money on will be covered by shapeless white robes and an incongruous dull-green apron. The beautiful veil that matches your dress will be taken from you and swapped out for some ugly generic thing they keep in a bin with a hundred others just like it.

When your turn comes, you will be herded into a small room in which those few family members who were able to wrangle a temple recommend will already be waiting. Even if there are only a few guests present, they will be crowded in together, because man, that room is *tiny*. A temple worker will place you into position.

You will not be walking down any aisle. Your father, assuming he could get in, will not be giving you away. There will be no music, no flowers, no maid of honor, no attendants, and no exchange of rings. Some old man you likely don't even know will conduct the ceremony, asking you to kneel across the altar from your soon-to-be husband, holding his hand in that awkward grip you learned the day before. Some words will be spoken, you will give your assent, then you will be told you may kiss each other if you wish.

In an instant, it's over. Your loved ones will tiptoe over, milling around you quietly, extending their congratulations in muted whispers so low you would think there is a sleeping baby somewhere everyone is trying not to wake. They are happy for you, but they are extremely reserved. This is, after all, The House of the Lord, and no place to be expressing joy.

But that doesn't last long anyway because you will all be ushered out quickly so they can get going on the next lucky couple.

What many wedding parties don't know about is that very often the temple workers are running a quiet little side tally about the number of weddings it looks like they'll be chalking up by the end of the day. A good friend of mine who goes by the online name of "Insana D" has aptly declared that when the folks at the Salt Lake City temple brag that they performed 168 sealings in one day, it should put the whole thing in perspective:

"Run em' through...we're moving, we're walking, keep going...yeah, yeah, say your vows, blah blah blah, time and eternity, and ...you're done..."

"NEXT!"

"I've had more intimate experiences," she says, "at the DMV."

You have probably heard about, or even seen, a bride sobbing inconsolably through her own wedding reception for reasons no one present was able to fathom. Now you know why. This was not the direction she expected the happiest day of her life to go.

### **A Plea For Common Sense**

Doubtless you've heard of the *Temple Wedding Petition* currently circulating on the web. It's sponsors are asking the current leadership of the church to reconsider the divisive policies that currently drive the modern LDS approach to marriage.

These policies dictate that a couple who chooses to begin their marriage with a traditional church ceremony in order that they may include their loved ones in the celebration, must thereafter wait a full year before they can go to the temple to be sealed.

This policy doesn't take into account the temple worthiness of the couple, or how devoted they are to the gospel. What matters is that they defied current Church protocol and made a choice, on their own, to be wed in the manner they felt most suitable to them. In the eyes of the Magisterium, that is rebellion, and rebellion must be punished.

This practice of forcing a couple to wait a year for their sealing ordinance is not doctrinal; it did not come to the leadership of the church through revelation. And here's an irony for you: if both the husband and wife are recommend holders, they can go to the temple during the time of their probation and, acting as proxies, be sealed for their dead relatives. They just can't be sealed to each other.

It's difficult to come to any other conclusion than that this policy is vindictive, especially because the policy is unfairly applied according to one's geographic location.

Since governments in many foreign countries will not recognize a marriage performed in secret, the LDS Church makes special provision for those foreign members. The church "allows" those couples to be married civilly out in the open to satisfy local laws and customs, then lets them be sealed in the temple as soon after the wedding as is convenient for them. But if you live in North America and have a civil marriage first, you don't get that privilege.

This double standard shows that either God's law is subordinate to civil law, or that the leaders of the Church are acting arbitrarily. It's your guess.

### **Why A Petition?**

We are living in a time when there are more part-member families in the church than ever before, and even many of us who were raised in the church have close relatives who for one reason or another find themselves ineligible for a temple recommend. It wasn't always thus. In the old days all it took to gain access to The House of the Lord was a simple recommendation from your bishop, who knew you and was acquainted with your good character.

If your father drank a cup of coffee in the morning, or took a chaw of tobacco, it was no big deal. Petty vices like that would not have kept him from attending your wedding.

No longer. Over time, requirements for admission have gotten more stringent and the list of qualifying questions so numerous, that no matter how virtuous, lovely, or of good report you and your fiance may be, some of your loved ones may not make the cut. If you're planning a temple marriage, it will probably be a lonelier affair than you expected it would.

Pity the young convert bride whose father is completely baffled by a religion that won't allow him to give his own daughter away at her wedding. Church headquarters now advises stake presidents to have part-member families all meet together in the stake president's office a week or two prior so non-members can have it explained to them how the temple is a holy place where only certain worthy members can gain entry.

These meetings rarely help. No matter how hard the stake president tries to couch it all in terms the parents will understand, all that religious bibble-babble really translates to "Tough luck, Pops, you're gonna miss your daughter's wedding."

### **Why Not Take Your Time?**

I join with the fine folks behind the petition in calling for an end to the stigma that often attaches to those who marry outside the temple. Happily, there is a growing number of young Mormon couples bucking the trend and reclaiming their power. They recognize that *this is **their** wedding*, and they don't give a hang what anyone thinks about their worthiness or devotion to the gospel. No man and no institution of men will have control over their personal happiness. This will be the celebration of their love, and they will share it with everyone who loves them.

Although I'd like to see the negative stigma of a civil wedding removed from Mormon culture, I don't have anything against the happy couple waiting a good year or so before entering the temple to have their union sealed. In fact, I recommend it. But how long they wait should be their decision, and no one else's -certainly not someone who claims "authority" over them.



I strongly believe the ceremony that seals you and your soul-mate for time and all eternity is a solemn procedure that should not be rushed. That's why I think placing it up front amid all the distractions of the wedding day detracts from the sacredness of the occasion. The holy nature of the ordinance is lost amid the frenzied hustle and bustle leading up to the typical marriage, reception, and honeymoon plans. The numerous distractions demanding the attention of the participants can often blur or bury what should be a calm and thoughtful commitment.

Both the bride and groom have plenty on their minds on their wedding day. The bride has her mind on the reception to follow, while the groom is usually busy thinking about what's going to happen after the reception.

There's a story of a young cowboy from Spanish Fork and his bride-to-be in the temple sealing room, kneeling across the altar from one another. As the officiator is preparing to perform the ceremony, he asks the groom, "Isn't this the greatest moment of your life?"

"Not yet," the kid grins, "but we're gittin' there."

I think it's a good idea for a married couple to take their time and let the marriage marinate a little before being sealed together, because then the sealing ceremony will have a much deeper meaning. Get to know each other; get those first dozen or so major quarrels out of the way and behind you, settle in with each other a bit, get in a lot of loving.

There is a deep, indescribable spiritual unity that develops in a couple after they have had sufficient time to experience the intense physical connection that comes with marriage, a shared intimacy that I feel should already be in place at the time the sealing ordinance is performed. A husband and wife who know what it is to be both spiritually and physically bonded, and who come to the altar with a calm, sober appreciation of their holy union are, in my opinion, more capable of appreciating the sacred ordinance that further binds and seals them together forever.

An experience like that is simply too sacred and special to be wasted on newbies. We don't baptize our kids just because they turn eight. First we prepare them. Likewise, we should allow our young people to be prepared for the ordinance of an eternal marriage. The best preparation for an eternal marriage... is marriage. You deserve to have some experience in it.

**Let The Spirit Guide Your Choice**

Joseph Smith was killed two years before the Nauvoo temple was completed, so we can't know for certain if he would have changed his mind and approved of the clandestine marriages that later took place in that holy edifice.

But we do know the purposes to which he put the Kirtland temple. In that sacred building the prophet introduced washings and annointings, gave lectures, and even held church-style meetings. There is no record indicating that secret marriages ever took place in the Kirtland temple. Such procedures were introduced later, after Joseph Smith was dead.

In the 19th century history of this church, a wedding created a marriage, and a sealing was a special ordinance the purpose of which was to seal that marriage forever.

I think we should take the founder of our faith at his word when he affirms that all marriages in this church are to be solemnized in a public meeting or feast. Inexplicably, when the Doctrine and Covenants was reprinted in Utah in 1876, that section was quietly dropped without any reason given. It no longer fit with the views of the current management, and if left in the scriptures, it would have stood as an awkward reminder that at one time the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had actually been run by a living prophet.

Personally, it doesn't matter to me if those verses are not present in my current Triple Combination. Until I'm permitted to see a revelation from the Lord declaring those rules null and void, I'm going to have to assume they still stand.

Sometimes the old ways are the best.

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Rock has appeared on a Mormon Stories podcast episode where he discusses this issue. If you would like to listen to it, [click here](#).

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