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Theological and Missiological Lessons from Telugu Marriage Engagement and Betrothal Ceremonies

In the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, much like other parts of India, weddings and the events surrounding them are the most important moments of life. There are many events that make up a wedding in India, including the engagement and betrothal, ceremonies which are the focus of this article. While there is value in exploring Hindu weddings and all the different rituals involved, this article is focused on weddings in Andhra Pradesh village and town settings involving followers of Jesus. The purpose is to demonstrate how local Telugu people (the dominant language in Andhra Pradesh) have developed engagement and betrothal ceremonies by combining their own wedding traditions and heritage with the Word of God to create dynamic experiences of relationship, joy, and love.

There are limited sources in this article because I am drawing primarily from my own experiences in India. I have participated in numerous weddings in Andhra Pradesh as an attendee of friends' and church members' weddings, as a pastor, as a groom in my own wedding to Anuradha Chadalawada, which took place in India, and as the head of the household for my wife's sibling's marriages.¹ These experiences have given me ample opportunity to observe and participate in marriage engagements and betrothals both as an observer and as an immersed participant.

The Engagement

Most Indian marriages are arranged by the parents and involve limited decision making by those getting married, although often they are

now given some say in whether or not they agree to the marriage match that the parents have chosen. Once this is done an engagement ceremony date is agreed on by the parents of the two people who will be married. The church is also involved in this process and the engagement ceremony often takes place at the local church where the young woman is from. Attendees at the ceremony include far more than the parents of the future bride and groom. It also includes important extended family like brothers and sisters, grandparents, and close uncles and aunts. Usually the local church members are also invited and attend as witnesses to the engagement.

There are certain important ritual actions that take place at the engagement ceremony. The future groom must provide the future bride with a new sari of high quality, while the bride to be must provide the future groom with a new set of high-quality dress clothes, usually a shirt and pants. There is also often an exchange of engagement rings between the couple.² These items are displayed in front of all present as a testimony to the agreement and union between the two individuals and their families. The pastor reads the story of Abraham's servant who goes in search of a wife for Isaac found in Genesis 24. The pastor often emphasizes verses 52-54. It is in these verses that Abraham's servant presents a number of fine gifts to the family of Rebekah as a sign that they desire to have her marry Isaac. It is also clear in this story that the whole family on both sides are involved in the decision-making process, not just the individuals getting married, much like in India today.

After the pastor reminds the couple and the attending audience of the story of Rebekah, the two who are getting engaged are then asked to leave the room and change into the clothing that has been bought for them. They then come back, sit before the church in their new clothes and proceed to officially demonstrate the engagement by the exchange of flower garlands, which they drape over each other's necks. Then the pastor blesses the couple along with the family members.

Afterwards, a large feast is prepared for all in attendance. This also follows Genesis 24:54 in which food and eating together was a demonstration of hospitality by Rebekah's family towards Abraham's servant. The engagement in India takes place at the location where the future bride is from, which is similar to the narrative of Genesis 24. From this point onward the wedding plans will commence, with the wedding usually taking place a month or two later, but it can also be much later. If either party were to break off the engagement at this stage it would cause a great deal of shame to both families but especially to those perceived as responsible for the annulment. This, however, rarely takes place once the engagement has occurred.

The Betrothal

While in much of the Western world marriage no longer has a betrothal ceremony, in some parts of Southern India this event is still a very important part of the wedding process. The betrothal ceremony takes place the evening before the day of the wedding. This event includes the bride and her family such as aunts, uncles, cousins, the groom's parents, and the local pastor and church members. It takes place at the home of the bride. The groom is not allowed to come to the ceremony. The groom and bride are not allowed to meet until the next day at the final wedding ceremony in the church.³

This ceremony also draws from Genesis 24 for its inspiration. Along with the reference to Genesis it is also often noted by pastors that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was betrothed or pledged to marry Joseph prior to the consummation of their marriage. This ceremony of betrothal is one of the most joyous occasions in the marriage process and involves several elements that bring joy into the event and draw the two families together.

Similar to the engagement, the betrothal includes the giving of gifts. However, in the betrothal there is even more similarity to the Genesis 24 narrative whereby Isaac and his family are the only one's recorded to have given gifts, while Rebekah and her family share their hospitality and food. The groom's sisters and often times aunts must travel to the home of the bride bearing gifts. At the betrothal event itself the groom's sister or close female relative must display the gifts they have brought one by one to the onlooking members of the bride's family while the audience and pastor look on. These items include clothing, makeup, sometimes jewelry, and other items. These items are sent with the expectation that the bride will use them for the wedding as a sign that she is now leaving her family and joining her husband's family. Often this event takes on an air of comedic fun when the bride's family feigns disappointment in the meager number of gifts or the quality of gifts resulting in a make-believe dispute usually ending in laughter all around.

After this the local pastor or pastors give a biblically-based message on the importance of marriage and what God expects from those who get married. The passages of Scripture used vary based on what the pastor feels is the most appropriate message for the occasion. There is also a special prayer of blessing for the bride-to-be at which point several of the important female relatives surround her and pray for her.

After this the whole gathering once again eats together in a feast provided by the family of the bride. This is usually a time of joyous laughter and interaction between friends and family, which serves to strengthen the bond that will be cemented in the final wedding ceremony on the following

day. The betrothal often goes late into the night. Finally, the bride, along with some close female relatives, will go and spend the night in a house in the groom's village or town although not in the groom's home. This is an experiential symbol of the change coming with the marriage when the bride will leave her family to live with her husband. This final leaving often involves some tears as the realization of the changes to come begin to be experienced by the bride.

Both the engagement and the betrothal are joyous occasions that involve clothing, sermons, and special instructions by the elders concerning marriage, food, feasting, laughter, and tears. These events engage all five senses and are a delight to be a part of whether you are the bride or groom, a family member, village elder, or pastor, or church member. These are moments when the community is strengthened and families bonded together in new and important ways. Most significantly, all of the events connected to the engagement and betrothal are infused with connections to God. Many prayers of special blessing, carefully chosen Scripture narratives, and biblical passages that are relevant to the marriage event are important aspects of the ceremony. The spiritual connection demonstrated between the real-life marriage of the couple and God's love for them and for their families are exemplified in the joyous interactions between the couple and their families.

God's Word and Localized Theology

While there are several important lessons that can be learned from these ceremonies I will focus on a few pertaining to the importance and power of people engaging with the Word of God and doing theology in a localized setting to meet the needs of a local community.

The engagement ceremony and the basic approach to marriage among Telugu people, whether they identify as Christian or Hindu share similarities. Both consider marriage to be life's most important event, and thus deserving of special attention in preparation, use of resources, and connection to the transcendent. There is no doubt that those who are following Jesus and using the Word of God as a guide do some things differently in the engagement ceremony than Hindus. But most Hindus recognize that what these Christians are doing is an engagement because many of the elements are the same. What is clear is that the engagement ceremony of those following Jesus is very different from the average engagement process that European and North American societies practice. The Telugu engagement ceremony draws on ancient Indian traditions for inspiration. The engagement ceremony is not traceable to any Western missionary influence as my research in both English and Telugu has revealed. Rather,

in its development that took place several generations ago, Indians incorporated the Word of God into an existing practice to make sure that it was in line with what they saw God's people doing in Scripture concerning marriage engagements.

Hindus also have a similar ceremony to the betrothal that followers of Jesus continue to practice. Basically, no European or North American Christian traditions have this type of ceremony the night before the wedding. Thus, once again this is something that has been developed by Indian's several generations ago to creatively bring together families in a way that both celebrates the marriage and keeps God in the center of the wedding experience. They have drawn from narratives and passages of Scripture to legitimate this ceremony and have creatively allowed normal Telugu practices around weddings to be included so that even someone who does not identify themselves as a follower of Jesus can participate and appreciate what is taking place.

What this demonstrates is that the Word of God, being inspired through the Holy Spirit, among faithful followers of Jesus has the power to lead followers to creatively celebrate marriage in ways that are locally meaningful, while keeping God front and center in the process, and leading to joyous celebration or "abundant life" (John 10:10). While the translation of the Scriptures into Telugu was originally done by non-Indians, even this aspect of the foreigner's role has been superseded by superior translations done more recently by local Telugu scholars. Thus, the role of non-Indians in this process is basically non-existent. Why is this significant?

First, this clarifies and demonstrates the power and role of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit in the local experience of followers of Jesus. All too often in books that deal with contextualization the role of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit comes across as secondary, while the role of the contextualizer appears primary. The instances shown above are a reminder that even without the input of a foreign influencer the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can lead sincere followers to creatively design ceremonies and experiences that reflect the Bible and the local setting. They often do not need the added, biased, influence of someone who has a limited knowledge of the local setting, which is the case with most foreigners.

Second, these experiences demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is guiding and inspiring people to creatively utilize the various elements of life that all humanity shares to further God's mission and build up the community towards the "abundant life" he desires all humanity to have. Hindu's have long celebrated marriage, and while they often include elements in the marriage that are meant to invoke a non-biblical god or goddess, it must still be recognized and affirmed that the emphasis they put on marriage is not merely a similarity between them and those who follow Jesus.

It is actually an example of the Spirit of God shining through in the act of marriage, which God initiated in the beginning (Gen 2:23-25). It is right to continue to follow many of the same styles of celebration that Hindus have been doing if those practices lead to family bonds that are stronger and uphold the sanctity of marriage as found in the Bible. Other things in the marriage process that Hindus observe may need to be discarded or replaced as the Christian Telugu communities have done.

Neither the Hindu community nor those following Jesus would see any relevance to separating the cultural and religious aspects of these ceremonies. Everything is so intertwined that the only way to describe the events is to claim they are living out life as they see God wants to them to. This includes the prayers and Bible readings, but it also includes the food and the clothing aspects. All are important and if any elements were missing the ceremonies would be impoverished and become less than they should. Therefore, it is unwise to claim that some elements of these ceremonies are religious while other elements are cultural. All the various aspects are meant to build relationships within the community and draw people towards God.

Missiological Implications

So, what does this mean for mission? First, it is a reminder that one of the primary roles of mission activity is to get the Word of God into people's hands so that they can read or hear it and begin to incorporate it into their lives. This should be done in such a way as to prioritize their freedom in developing their life around the text without too much dictation from those outside their community. The Holy Spirit can be trusted to inspire and guide all people in any given place to creatively apply the Word to their local situations.

Some may ask, but does this mean the church should no longer have intercultural missions beyond getting the Bible into people's hands? I would argue that the answer to this is no but a nuanced no. Certainly there are many misconceptions about the role of the foreign agent in mission that put too much pressure and responsibility on the "missionary" and often block or get in the way of the actual Word of God and Holy Spirit from working. However, there is still a place for intercultural relationship building, in fact I would argue a necessity for it. This is true on a few different levels.

First, I myself have benefited from living and working in India and building numerous deep and meaningful relationships with Telugu people. As a result, I was both able to observe the ceremonies described above and become an intimate participant in them. My understanding of

the depth and riches of the Word of God grew exponentially through this process. I was able to learn new ways of reading narratives in the Bible such as Genesis 24 that impacted life in ways I had never imagined prior to my experience in India. This has thus broadened my understanding of God and humanity in ways that are immensely positive and helpful in my own walk with God and people. I am also then able to share these experiences with others from different contexts as I travel to give them a glimpse of God's creative goodness, demonstrated through his Telugu followers in India. Therefore, the process of sharing in mission and expanding the world's understanding of God is made possible through intercultural relationships. Paul Hiebert appeared to be hinting at something along these lines in an essay he wrote towards the end of his life for the book *Globalizing Theology*. In this essay he spent very little space discussing contextualization but rather began exploring the idea of the "missionary" as a go-between people among different backgrounds to help increase the knowledge of God around the world (Hiebert 2006).⁴

There is another element to the intercultural engagement that is also important. This element, however, must come after an extended period of time has been given for relationship building between the local person/people and those coming from another context. Without the building of meaningful relationships this aspect should not be engaged in. The person or people coming from another context may be able, over time, to recognize certain practices or beliefs that they feel are outside what the Scripture allows and that are not being noticed by local people. There is sometimes an ability for an outsider to notice things that are not obvious to those who have thought or practiced them for a long time. This could aid the community to move creatively towards correcting or enhancing their ways of living and believing to fit better with God's Word. Of course, those from an outside context need to be open to correction from those they are with, thus allowing for a mutual give and take.

Concerning the above practices of engagement and betrothal, I personally found little that I could creatively address to change at this point in the ceremonies. However, in other areas of life I have made suggestions on certain issues, to my Indian friends and family, that I feel could be done differently based on my reading of Scripture and experience with God. They have also done the same for me and have helped me grow. Experiencing the above ceremonies has certainly created opportunities for me to mature in my understanding of God and be able to share new ways of living with those I come in contact with.

Conclusion

In theological and missiological engagement there needs to be a greater emphasis on local settings. Often both theology and missiology are overly reliant on macro-discussions at the general level leaving out localized questions and applications. It is demonstrated above that the Word of God and the Holy Spirit are invested in local settings where real life questions are asked and where creative, biblically-based answers are being devised. This is a reminder of the power of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit within any group of people who desire to follow Jesus and use his Word as a guide for life. This is demonstrated above by looking at the creative practices of some Telugu followers of Jesus in their marriage engagement and betrothal celebrations which have been developed and continue to be practiced by many.

Notes

¹ My wife and her brother and sister lost their parents prior to our getting married. As a result, when my wife and I got married we became the head of the household and had the responsibility of arranging and overseeing the marriage of both her brother and sister. We are happy that both of them are married and have children of their own now.

² Sometimes wealthier families will also present the bride to be with a gold chain which the groom's sister, if he has one, will place around the neck of the bride to be.

³ In fact, the entire week prior to the wedding day the groom and bride are involved in numerous activities and functions related to the wedding but none of them are done together with each other.

⁴ Hiebert does briefly discuss contextualization but it is a peripheral idea to his overall argument.

Works Cited

Hiebert, Paul G. 2006. The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing. In *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*. Edited by Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, 288-308. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.



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