

Modern Kinship

A Queer Guide
to Christian Marriage

DAVID AND CONSTANTINO KHALAF

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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CHAPTER 7



THE BRIDELESS WEDDING

One of the aspects of same-sex marriage we appreciate most is the freedom it affords us to deconstruct the cultural traditions that weigh down the wedding experience. After all, once you've subtracted a bride or groom from the equation, pretty much anything goes. Grandma isn't going to sweat the small stuff, like whether you'll be throwing a bouquet.

When we began planning our wedding, we looked forward to all of the ways we could slough off traditional expectations: No resentful groomsmen in two-hundred-dollar rented tuxes. No drunken bachelor parties in Mexico or Las Vegas. No adorable flower girls plopping down rose petals as if the queen of Sheba had come to town.

We stripped out the cake, the bridal shower, the procession, and those disgusting perennial wedding favors known as Jordan almonds. After we removed the parties, the deserts, and the customs, we felt safe that we had avoided getting caught up in the corporate wedding machine, despite the onslaught of Facebook ads we received for bridal expos

and local jewelers. But stripping out everything also left us feeling empty.

A number of people offered to throw us engagement parties, but we politely declined. We figured the wedding was celebration enough. Fortunately, we have some awesome friends who decided to throw engagement parties for us anyway. During a trip to Los Angeles a few months before our wedding, the home group that David used to host for our old church turned a casual reunion into an amazing engagement party. A few days later, David's sister planned a brunch with his cousins so they could meet Constantino and learn the good news of our engagement. We left both of these events feeling full. While many traditions are pointless, over the top, or commercially driven, we realized that some do have a purpose. They serve as a public declaration of commitment, faith, and love, and they invite others to share in your joy.

During our engagement, we struggled with feeling as if our upcoming wedding was inferior, as if it was somehow "playing house" compared to opposite-sex weddings. This was in part because of the tepid response we had received from some friends and family. Perhaps we were afraid to be too enthusiastic because it would only highlight those in our lives who were not. But it was also because, in eschewing tradition, we weren't approaching our wedding with the fanfare most ceremonies receive.

Don't downplay your wedding just because traditions feel too conventional or heteronormative. We learned that if you throw out all the customs, the event stops looking like a celebration of marriage altogether. A wedding stripped of all tradition, ceremony, and rituals is just a signed certificate at a courthouse. It's official, but it lacks the commemoration and reverence to mark one of life's greatest decisions.

Traditions, however, are a double-edged sword. At their best they reinforce meaning, and at their worst they pervert it. Traditions become empty when we mindlessly go

through the motions without knowing why. Why is there a best man? Why do brides wear a white dress? Why is there a garter and bouquet toss? Traditions have also been used to harm and denigrate. For example, we might argue that the tradition of the father giving away the bride, as sweet as it looks, perpetuates a patriarchal framework in which women are essentially property.

For this reason, all couples, but especially LGBTQ couples, may be well served to dissect the elements of a wedding and ask critical questions: What genuinely matters to us in the act of marriage? Which traditions are meaningless or offensive? What traditions do we want to introduce? How can we imbue new meaning into old traditions? What nuptial elements honor our relationship or reflect Christ?

Meaningful traditions ground us in our identities. They remind us of who we are and where we came from. These might include cultural elements or traditions unique to your family. They might mean honoring special people in your lives who have supported your relationship. They might simply mean doing something silly and fun during your wedding because that's you, and doing so would honor your relationship.

Ultimately, we reached a good middle ground. We threw out the silly stuff, but we brought back historical traditions, such as having guests sign a wedding covenant as witnesses to our vows and having our sisters place a wedding cord over our shoulders to symbolize our union. The wedding wasn't as stripped down or avant-garde as we originally had hoped, but it echoed the joy and sanctity of the ceremony that has threaded marriages throughout time. And, most important, there were no Jordan almonds.

The Engagement “Ick” Emergency

I (David) wanted to be married—I just didn't want to *get* married. I had grown accustomed to dating a man and was finally comfortable in my own skin, but the prospect of a

same-sex wedding triggered all of my past insecurities like a floor full of sprung mousetraps. One of my first thoughts after accepting Constantino's proposal was "How can I work this so that we get married but don't actually have a ceremony?"

My faith in the sanctity of our relationship didn't dispel the recurring "ick" factor that had become so deeply ingrained in my psyche. I struggled with how to cope with this feeling without consistently isolating and rejecting my would-be husband. I knew an important part of this was communicating my feelings. In moments when I have tried to hide the ick, Constantino still has picked up on it and interpreted it as rejection. When I was able to verbalize my repulsion, he was intuitive enough to give me space when I needed it or lean in to help me push through it.

It was a five-alarm ick emergency the week we got engaged. The first image that came to mind was a wedding cake topper—that plastic thing you put on top of a cake—with two grooms. I had seen some with grooms that looked like the "twinsies" I so feared, with matching tuxedos and plastic smiles painted on their soulless faces. They were silly and trivial, and yet somehow the thought of them triggered in me all of my unresolved unease with my own gay relationship.

When I got home from the wonderful weekend in which we got engaged, I went straight to the computer and googled images of gay wedding cakes. I'm a masochist that way. I imagined myself as that cake topper, a painted smile on my face, standing next to my twin, and it disturbed me. Also, I hate cake.

I finally told Constantino that although I was honored and excited to marry him, I couldn't stand the idea of a wedding. I would do anything to avoid a ceremony—to escape aisles and altars and pastel-colored flower bouquets.

What Constantino pointed out to me was perhaps the most obvious and revolutionary idea during our

engagement. When I described to him my nightmare vision of matching outfits and scented candles and Shania Twain's "From This Moment" blasting as we marched down the aisle, he simply said, "But that's not you. That's not us." And it was true. Even if I were marrying a woman, I wouldn't want white rose centerpieces and a string quartet. I wouldn't want perfumed invitations or spring color schemes (not when I'm clearly an autumn). I would feel uncomfortable with those ceremonial aesthetics regardless of the person standing next to me at the altar.

So when I felt icky looking at photos of other gay weddings—whether it was grooms with matching rainbow suspenders or napkins monogrammed *Mr. & Mr.*—I reminded myself that that's not me. It was someone else's style and someone else's vision of romance, and it was all perfectly wonderful. But it wasn't me. And that was OK.

A big pitfall in relationships is to compare yours to other people's, or to develop a belief about what your marriage "should" look like. Every relationship has its own way of being in the world: its own internal culture, its own ways of navigating conflict, its own personality. The mistake I was making in envisioning our wedding was that I was overlaying another relationship's personality onto ours. It felt wrong because it *was* wrong. Every couple finds its own unique way to function, and while we can pick up tips from others, no two will be perfectly alike. This is a lesson many of us need to learn time and again.

Early in our relationship, when I was feeling especially icky one night about dating a man, Constantino said to me, "I wish you could stop focusing on the fact that I'm a man. Just think of me as Tino." It made all the difference. I discovered that when I removed the abstract concepts and the preconceived notions, the cultural norms and the disembodied visions of myself, the ickiness went away. I was just David. He was just Constantino. And we were just two people getting married.

One Bridge, Two Lives

We got married outdoors in May, under a bridge in Portland. The day could not have been more beautiful: gray and chilly, with bouts of soft rain. It may not have been what most people would call great wedding weather, but it was perfect for *our* wedding. The days leading up were sunny and hot, but the temperature dropped thirty degrees overnight and by Saturday, May 14, the clouds had rolled in. We may have been a little worried about guests getting wet, but a rainy wedding was our secret joy and hope. As a relationship that hasn't conformed to expectations in so many ways, the weather was the appropriate reflection of us. It was as if God had smiled on us again and said, "I know you, and this is the day I made for you. This day will feel like you."

After months of discussion and apprehension about mindless conventions and irrelevant societal norms, what did our wedding look like? Ultimately, it looked a lot like a wedding. We wanted to honor tradition, but not without examining it. We didn't want to be pointedly different; we just wanted to be genuine. Every tradition and word allowed in our ceremony had been carefully vetted to make sure it was true to us.

This authenticity is perhaps the most refreshing aspect of the same-sex weddings we have attended. There is a freshness in them, a new life. Because LGBTQ couples have only had federal recognition of marriage in the United States since 2015, and because they have defied convention at every turn, these couples have looked at the institution of marriage with a more critical eye than most. They have had to want it more than most because they have had to risk and sacrifice more than most to get it. The same-sex weddings we've attended have had an aura of triumph about them as well as an air of celebration. Love is palpable at these ceremonies, not only between the two getting married but among the community surrounding them.

These weddings are about two people, but they are also about so much more.

Our ceremony was set in a park under the St. John's Bridge, between two massive pillars that reach toward each other until they join at the top to look like the pointed archway of a cathedral. A line of these arches continues along the bridge's belly, down a long grassy slope and across the Willamette River. It is a striking, mesmerizing view.

To honor our guests—and to avoid having all eyes on us—we had them process instead of us. This caught people by surprise, but it brought us great delight. We had each guest announced by name, and small groups walked down a long set of stairs toward the altar. There, standing by the Communion table, we took time to speak to each guest, telling them why it meant so much to us that they were there.

Tears flowed. The first group was our pastors, and David started choking up right away. By the time his high school friends came down, he was full on laugh-crying. He couldn't even speak! It fell on Constantino to tell them how beautiful it was that they have remained close all these decades. Constantino broke down when his sisters got to the front, crying the ugliest ugly-cry you can imagine. After so much family rejection, it was a moment of healing, and his heart burst as he held each of them tight. David's tears returned as soon as his parents, sister, and dogs started walking down. We felt God's presence in every hug.

The ceremony started with the words of creation: "Then the LORD God said, 'It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him'" (Gen. 2:18, CEB). That day, as we helped each other set up chairs, carry boxes, and finish the table decorations, we knew, better than ever, that we were the helpers best suited for each other. We didn't want to sit front and center, apart from our guests, so after Constantino read the verse, we took our seats with the rest of the congregation.

There is one tradition we revived that has generally fallen out of favor in contemporary weddings: the marriage

objection. The words are famous and hackneyed, better suited these days to a punch line or a plot device in a movie: “If any of you can show just cause why these two may not be married under the laws of both God and man, speak now, or else forever hold your peace.”

When we presented this language in advance to our pastor, who was presiding over the ceremony, he raised an eyebrow. “You feel comfortable doing this?” he asked. In all of the weddings over which he had presided, he had never spoken that language in a ceremony.

He was on board with our choice, but he wanted us to be ready for the possibility that someone actually would object. How would we handle that? Who would address the objection? What would we say? Did we have Tasers ready? It seemed as if we were inviting trouble. But to us, it was a crucial component in kicking off not only our wedding but our lives together.

Anyone who has been in a relationship that has faced resistance from the outside world—whether from friends, family, church, or culture—is familiar with the yearning for peace and closure. There’s a desire to lay down weapons and put to rest all of the debate and opposition your relationship has caused. Whether it’s a same-sex pairing; or a relationship of distinct classes, or races, or religions; or even couples embarking on second marriages, outside pressure can break a couple. A marriage, then, is a victory, a triumph between two people who have overcome not only external opposition but the obstacles of self to mutually submit to each other in a covenant between themselves and God.

The inclusion of this language was symbolic. It was a declaration that the battle was over, the war was won, and it was time for celebration. Among our inner circles, the final opportunity to speak out against our marriage was in essence a call for reconciliation. For those who love us most, this language was an appeal to them—and a promise by them—that from our wedding day forward, these

people agreed to be our allies, not our enemies. They committed to being for us, not against us. When we asked sixty of our friends and family to “hold their peace,” what we were really asking was for them to help us hold *our* peace, to help us hold together our union with the love and support only community can provide.

The words were spoken and there were, fortunately, no objections. David’s family dog barked a lot, but we interpreted that as a vote of confidence.

With that past, we could enjoy one of the true highlights of the ceremony: the music. Our pastor of worship put together a ten-person choir and arranged three songs for us. The first song, immediately following the verse from Genesis, set the mood for celebration: Hall and Oates’s “You Make My Dreams Come True.” Then, as we knelt after the marriage, they blessed us by singing a prayer. They asked that God, who is Perfect Love and Perfect Life, grant us faith, hope, endurance, trust, and peace. The ceremony ended with a joyous rendition of “Oh Happy Day.”

Jesus said, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life.” He promised that if we keep company with him, we’ll “learn to live freely and lightly” (Matt. 11:28–30, *The Message*).

That day, we wanted to experience with our friends what *The Message* translation of that Bible passage describes as “the unforced rhythms of grace.” We wanted to remember that Jesus “won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting” on us. Rather than have one person go up and read for a long time, we had a Gospel flash mob: a dozen friends stood up one by one and each read a verse.

For the vows, we kept the traditional formula. We liked what that structure said about the nature of Christian marriage and the elements of the covenant. We started by each making a promise to God to care for the other “in faithfulness and holiness of life.” We then gave ourselves to one another, promising to endure all things and bear all things,

in times of plenty and in times of want, and to forsake all others for as long as we both shall live. We made these promises trusting in God's grace, Christ's love, and the Spirit's help. We exchanged rings as symbols of our vows, and our pastor pronounced us "kin, married in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Our first act as a married couple was to serve Communion to our guests. The plates and cups we used belong to our church—our brave, beautiful, loving church. We served our pastors and elders, our home group, the friends we see every Sunday. We served our family, and we served friends visiting from out of town. At last, we served each other.

When we took our vows, we made a promise to become lifelong helpers to one another and servants to our community. The cross on the altar was also our church's, and as we stood by it, communing with our loved ones, it dawned on us that this was what it meant to be married.

Questions for Reflection

1. What traditions are important to you in a wedding? Which would you keep out of your ceremony?
2. Have you ever been to a same-sex wedding? What was the experience like for you?
3. How might same-sex weddings inform opposite-sex weddings?
4. Is marriage still relevant in today's culture? Why or why not?