

EDITORIAL

The widespread holding of wedding services in church is a comparatively recent phenomenon in many parts of Scotland. Under normal circumstances it is almost unknown nowadays for the minister to marry a couple in his manse or in a hotel or function-room, though we have heard recently of one ceremony which was conducted in a canal barge, and it would seem that there is a spreading tendency to resort to similarly eccentric locations.

Be this as it may, a most disturbing trend, where many church marriages are concerned, is the accelerating extravagance of all the non-essential trappings, and the ever-declining reverence and apparent spirituality of many of the guests. Some, during the hymns, will be whispering to one another with no apparent appreciation of the solemnity of the occasion, while others will be staring stonily forward in cold indifference towards God and his Church. The requests are beginning to come in for the video recording of the service, and some ministers are giving their consent without due regard for the question of whether the end product will, in any significant way, truly reflect all that is essential in the service. The bridegroom and best man sometimes turn up in the most outlandish gear, without giving any thought to how they will feel, five years later, when they look back through the photographs of the occasion. Little tots will be decked-up as page-boys or flower-girls, and, being far too young either to understand the first thing about what is going on, or even to remain still and silent, will be a constant source of amusement to some sections of the congregation.

'Sour grapes, Mr Editor, sour grapes!' We trust not. Of course there are many young people in our impersonal, computerized society who feel that they, as individuals, count for little or nothing. For such, a grandiose church wedding may be the only occasion in their whole lives on which they feel that they may, of right, occupy the centre of the stage. It injects a little temporary meaning and significance into their otherwise drab lives. On behalf of the bride, this plea is entered: 'After all, it's her big day; let her have all she wants; she's the one they've all turned out to see.' All very well, except that a church wedding is an act of Christian Worship - it is God's 'big day' ; he is the one who should have everything he wants; and he is the one towards whom everyone's attention should be directed. When God is permitted to occupy his rightful place in the centre of the stage, we, for our part, should be humble and self-effacing. This does not mean that a church wedding cannot be full of life and colour, or that the bride cannot have her 'big day' , but that everything that is done and said must be to the glory of God. One fears that in many cases God has not been deliberately excluded from the list of guests ("Would that you were cold or hot!") - he has simply been overlooked.

But let us be thankful that, alongside those who feel that their wedding must be an extravaganza, there are a number of more thoughtful and practical people who are capable of appreciating the fact that a proper human sense of dignity and satisfaction may be attained through the conscious pursuit of simplicity and the careful avoidance of lavish expenditure. Sadly, it is this kind of concern which drives some to seek a civil marriage, for they fear that to be married in church without all the customary frippery would seem somehow less than satisfactory, and would appear Scrooge-like to their relatives, friends and neighbours. Perhaps those ministers who weakly condone the escalating unseemliness of some extravagant church weddings are reinforcing this false impression of what is proper to the occasion. There may, after all, be something to be said for a wedding held on a canal barge. While there is no way of controlling what comes down from the skies on a wedding day, the severe curtailment of the guest list would help to ensure that the participants would avoid a soaking through a different list cause!

FROM A LETTER SENT BY THE RT REV BISHOP J E LESSLIE NEWBIGIN to the REV DR R. STUART LOUDEN.

Very many thanks for the copy of your address to the Church Service Society. I have read this with the deepest appreciation. It encourages me as I struggle in our little (ex-congregational) church at Winson Green to bring more sense of the holy into a style of sacramental observance which has become very thin. I fear there are some of the older people in my little flock who might find no difficulty with the phrase 'purely symbolic'. But I am sure, with you, that the remedy must lie in being more evangelical and not in being more legalistic.

By the way, I wonder if you know that the Book of Common Order of 1940 had a very important influence in the development of the CSI Liturgy. At the beginning there was no thought of developing a common liturgy, since the emphasis was on preserving the liberty of congregations to follow their accustomed ways. But when the first Synod met the question arose about the form of our communion service. No Moderator had yet been elected since no Synod had yet met. It met in Madurai, and as I was the local bishop it fell to me to preside. I followed the BCO rite. For the vast majority of those present it was a new and profound experience. Most of them had never known anything except the Book of Common Prayer, its Methodist derivative, or else the very disorderly orders of the congregationalists. As soon as the service was over a great many members of the Synod came to me and spoke of what the service had meant and said: 'We must have a common form which we can all use at the next Synod'. That was the starting point of the process that led to the formation of the CSI liturgy.