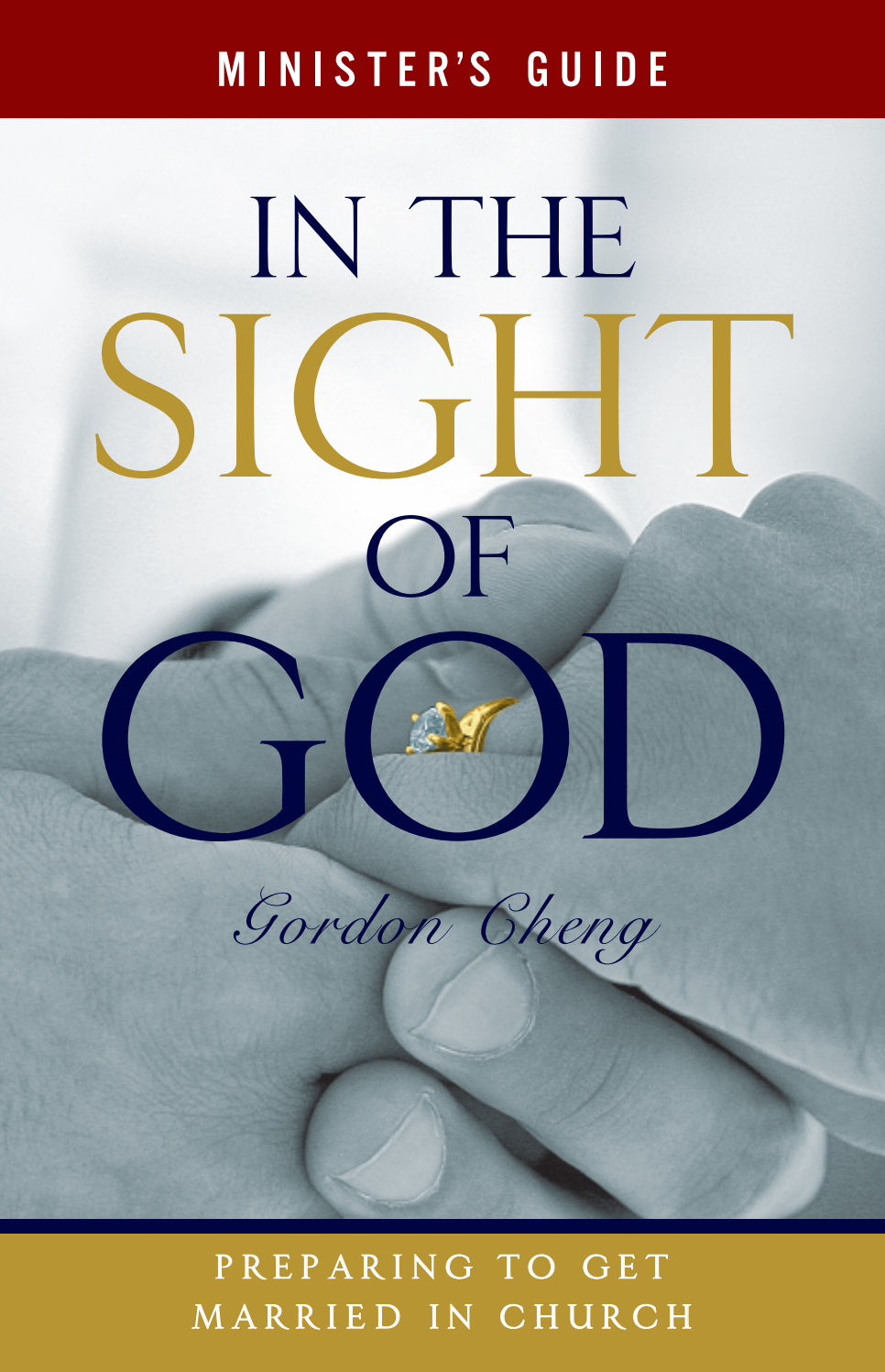


MINISTER'S GUIDE

IN THE
SIGHT
OF
GOD



Gordon Cheng

PREPARING TO GET
MARRIED IN CHURCH

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his is a guide for ministers who are wanting to use *In the Sight of God* with couples preparing for marriage.

In the Sight of God contains four Bible studies that focus on different aspects of marriage. The aim is not only to get couples thinking constructively about married life from the Bible, but also to provide an opportunity for non-Christian couples to think about where they stand with God as they prepare for a 'church wedding'.

This guide contains notes and suggestions for guiding the discussion. You will also need your own copy of the couples' booklet.



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IN THE SIGHT OF GOD

HOW TO USE *IN THE SIGHT OF GOD*



These four studies were developed through my own experience of preparing couples for marriage in the course of different parish and non-parish ministries over the past 15 years. I wrote the studies because I believe that marriages are more important than weddings and that, even though we believe this in theory, in practice the demands of the wedding can absorb most of the time in the lead-up. These studies are designed to pull the balance the other way ever so slightly, and help couples think more carefully about what marriage is and how to be ready for it.

I also wrote them because I believe that as Christian ministers conducting Christian weddings, we ought to have a concern not just for marriages but for *Christian* marriages. The reason for encouraging people to choose to have a Christian wedding is because we believe that the wedding promises are being made in the sight of the Lord God. Also, when we talk about Christian marriage, we have to ask the question about how the truths of the gospel can and should be applied to the marriage relationship. One central example of how the Bible shows this is Ephesians 5, which reminds us that the way the husband relates to the wife ought to reflect the way Jesus relates to his church. This means that

thinking about how husbands relate to wives must involve also thinking about how God relates to us—and how God relates to us is through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In one sense, discovering how this works in practice continues until, as the marriage order says, “we are parted by death”. But thinking about this needs to start well before marriage. These studies are designed to move the process along.

Most church couples will see this very easily, and will not need to be convinced about the value of meeting with a minister to discuss what the Bible says about marriage. However non-church couples, in my experience, will see the value as well. Most people who deliberately choose a church wedding do so because they really believe there is some spiritual value in getting married in a church rather than somewhere else. As well as this, they are often more prepared than many to admit that weddings can become a serious distraction from marriage. In my experience, they will almost always be more than happy to look at what the Bible says about marriage.

The pattern I’ve followed over the years would be familiar to many ministers. The first contact for non-church attenders tends to be the church secretary or administrator, who accepts bookings for weddings in line with the church’s policy (e.g. people who live locally, or have some personal connection with the church). In some of the churches where I’ve ministered, it would have been possible, at least theoretically, to have multiple weddings booked for every weekend in spring, summer and autumn throughout the year. Therefore it is useful to recognize that there is only a finite amount of time and energy that can be put into wedding preparation. The number of available timeslots for weddings per year should be determined accordingly. Clear guidelines such as this are important for harassed church secretaries.

Then, during the initial meeting, the minister confirms the date of the wedding and chats with the couple to find out things like how they met, and why (in the case of non-church people) they are interested in a church wedding—often a really useful question to find out where they stand spiritually. He also explains that they will have four meetings before the actual date of the wedding. Given that it is possible to cover each study in half an hour, this leaves plenty of time to deal with other matters. I have found it useful to work through a brief marriage preparation course like *Prepare-Enrich*¹ alongside the Bible studies. *Prepare-Enrich* may not be specifically Christian, but it can raise a number of important relational issues, including spiritual ones. Four meetings will also allow plenty of time to deal with other details of the wedding that need to be worked out.

The study booklet should be given to the wedding couple at the introductory meeting, at which time you can explain what the following meetings are all about. This is also a great time to explain, using the introduction to the booklet, just how much God favours and supports marriage, and how the enjoyment of the companionship and everything that goes with it—children included—are a good gift of God. Invite the couple to open up the study booklet and flip through quickly to see what's involved.

The initial meeting is also the right time to give to the couple all the other paperwork associated with the wedding. This means that formalities can be dealt with early and questions answered. You may have a standard order of service that you use; if so, this is the time to give that to the couple so that they can look through it at their leisure. As far as the study booklet goes, recommend to the

¹ See <http://www.prepare-enrich.com.au/training/training.html>

couple that they might like to go through each session before they come back to you. They could even fill in some answers to each session in pencil ahead of time if they would like to do that.

After this, you can ask them if they have any questions, and organize the next meeting. Because there are a number of meetings planned, there should be no pressure to get through all the details in this first get-together, and it is worth reassuring the couple that there will be plenty of time to deal with any questions or issues that come up.

The study booklet for *In the Sight of God* contains four studies, including readings and questions, a traditional order for the celebration of marriage,² and a number of other appendices. The booklet has been kept deliberately simple and short. The idea is that the wedding couple (and you as the minister) should feel that they have every freedom to pursue different topics that come up, and that any preparation or reading that they do is, at the same time, enjoyable and important without being in any way burdensome. This means, however, that you as the minister will have a slightly greater level of responsibility for being clear about the aim and content of each session, and what it is that you are trying to get across from the Bible about both marriage itself and the gospel. This leader's guide is meant to help in this process. Nevertheless, feel free to use the freedom that the structure will give you to range over any other important material that you need to discuss, or that is specific to weddings at your church. Everything about the material is intended to make it easier, not harder, to help you to talk about important gospel issues as they relate to the marriage relationship.

² Those from an Australian Anglican background will recognize it as the first order from *An Australian Prayer Book* (1978).

The appendices in the study guide are fairly self-explanatory. You may want to point out to the couple that the appendices are there and that they contain some useful extra material. As well as the traditional order for the celebration of marriage, there are some suggested Bible readings that would work well as readings related to the wedding sermon. I would recommend that you ask the wedding couple to go away, look through the suggestions in this appendix with a Bible, and pick their own readings. The added advantage of this is that it will help any couples who are not be familiar with the Bible to learn more about how the Bible is set out, how to find a book of the Bible, and how to look up Bible chapters and verses.

Here are a few other ideas that you could consider:

- Give the couple a free Bible in a modern translation as a gift from the church.
- Have three identical Bibles on hand during the course of each meeting, one for you and two for the couple. This way you can quickly and easily look up the context of whatever Bible passages you are looking at.
- Encourage another couple from church to join you for the first study. Ideally this couple should be recently married themselves and members of the congregation to which the wedding couple already belong, or (in the case of non-church people) might potentially belong.
- Plan your first proper meeting for a Sunday after a church service or meeting that the couple could potentially be involved in (if they are a non-church couple). Encourage them to come along to church on that day.
- Some churches find that non-church couples are quite willing to get involved in other aspects of church life, such as regular courses introducing newcomers to Christianity

(e.g. *Simply Christianity*, published by Matthias Media). These courses could be a part of the preparation for marriage for those who want to have a Christian wedding but have no idea of what Christianity really means.