



Are Unity Candles appropriate for weddings in a Lutheran church?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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You have likely attended a wedding that included the lighting of what has been commonly called a Unity Candle. Perhaps you have included this element in your own wedding. Have you wondered why? What is the history behind this practice and does it have a valuable function in the Christian marriage service?

As stated in its name, the Unity Candle functions as a way to symbolize two people joining their lives together as one. Not much can be said authoritatively regarding the origin of the Unity Candle. Its history is prone to legend, one being it began on a soap opera. An article on the internet is written by a man who claimed to have invented it for his own wedding in 1969. In any case, sources do agree it is a rather recent innovation in the latter half of the 20th century and originating in the United States.

Use of the candle, then, brings up questions of what to use from the surrounding culture and how to do so in a way that is theologically sound. As the Evangelical Lutheran Worship companion volume, *The Christian Life* says succinctly, “Luther understood the influence that cultural practices exert on marriage rites and was not concerned with these customs as long as common prayer and God’s blessing are prominent” (*Life Passages*, 187). Other church bodies such as the Roman Catholic church do not forbid the practice, but Unity Candles are not an official part of the marriage rite.

Baptismal Identity and the Marriage Service

Much of the cultural emphasis on a wedding focuses on the romantic love of the couple for each other. Ceremonial inventions such as the Unity Candle reflect values of the culture rather than of the church (*The Christian Life*, p. 188). In common understanding, marriage is about finding the perfect someone and loving them forever.

When a couple seeks the blessing of their marriage in a Christian worship setting, however, they also are celebrating marriage as part of their baptismal call, including love for the community. This is often new and unfamiliar to couples but frees them to understand marriage as faithfulness not only to one another, but their love directed outward for the sake of the world.

In Holy Baptism, each person receives the gift of a candle and hears these or similar words: “Let your light so shine before others...” (Holy Baptism, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 231) If one does plan to include a Unity Candle, it is important that after lighting the new candle, the two individual tapers remain lit. As Christians, marriage does not eliminate one’s own identity. Individuals are still baptized people of God, uniquely made and treasured in God’s image.

Another way to make visible the baptismal vows and light symbolism would be to begin the service at the font with the Paschal Candle lit and prominently displayed. The couple is together, yet the primary symbolism is rooted in the baptismal call.

Practical Guidance

Some couples may decide that the vows and sharing of rings is fully sufficient for symbolizing their unity as a couple. If Holy Communion is celebrated, unity is celebrated as being one in the body of Christ.

If a couple does want to include the Unity Candle, the Marriage service in ELW contains this rubric after the Giving of Rings and Acclamation: “Other symbols of marriage may be given at this time” (ELW, p.288).

Since the advent of the Unity Candle, other cultural rites have found their way into wedding services such as the more recent Unity Sand Ceremony. In all these cultural rites, consider how they serve marriage as part of our baptismal callings.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

- ☞ Can a civil marriage be blessed in a church?
- ☞ How can the centrality of baptism be renewed?
- ☞ What music is appropriate for Lutheran weddings?
- ☞ How do we use a Paschal Candle?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website](#)

- ☞ *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
- ☞ *Can We Talk? Engaging Worship and Culture*. ELCA, 2016.

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress](#)

- ☞ Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- ☞ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. pew edition. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.

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