

Holy Matrimony, the Church, and the Mystery of the Gospel
Addendum One: Holy Matrimony as Covenant Love
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Introduction

How is Holy Matrimony a covenant? In what manner is a covenant different from a contract? What makes covenant love different from worldly love? What difference does bond of a covenant love make?

Holy Matrimony as Covenant

What is a covenant? Covenant is an eternal binding promise that two parties will love one another unconditionally. This eternal covenant is not a contract. In a contract, the relationship is based on performance if the terms of the contract are broken the relationship is terminated under penalty. In a covenant relationship, committed love is the basis of the relationship. If the covenant is broken, the offended party pursues the offender winning back their heart through discipline, grace, and love (Jer 32:40-41).

Obedience and mutual affection is all that is required for enjoyment of the full blessing of the covenant.¹ A covenant is graciously given and then fully enjoyed as the participants partake of its joyous promises. “Covenant obligations in no way merit or earn God’s covenant promises, but they are the way in which God has appointed us to experience and enjoy the blessings that he freely gives us in his promises.”²

New Testament theologian, Thomas Schreiner, affirms that a covenant is a choice between two parties based on a relationship in which two individuals, or groups, make binding promises.³ Covenants and contracts both have promises and obligations, but in a covenant the promises involve a relationship, whereas contracts are impersonal and maintain no personal bond.

Covenants stand apart from contracts because the promises are made in a relational context. We are not surprised to learn, then, that marriage in the Scriptures is described as a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). In marriage a husband and a wife choose to enter a covenant relationship, and they make binding promises to each other, pledging lifelong loyalty and faithfulness.⁴

Covenants are not only relational, but are freely chosen. The husband and wife choose to be in lifelong union, but children and parents cannot be in covenant relationship for they are already bound together by blood relation. Also, covenants have promises and obligations of love and admiration, but contracts are based on performance and duty.⁵

¹ James B. Torrance, “The Contract or Covenant God?” 1998 Reformation Heritage Lectures [audio] (Birmingham, AL: Beeson Divinity School, 1998).

² Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Lord’s Supper* [Short Studies in Biblical Theology] (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, (2019), 29.

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World* (Short Studies in Biblical Theology series) 3 (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway), Kindle Edition, 13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid

Though the word, “covenant,” is not used in the Genesis creation accounts, all the necessary elements of a covenant are found in Genesis chapters one and two. Present at creation are two parties, Adam and Eve. God gave them requirements and qualifications putting forth that they not eat from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17; 3:3, 11). Also, the Lord put forth curses and blessing with the encouragement that if Adam and Eve obeyed they would enjoy God’s unmediated presence.⁶

Scripture does make explicit reference to marriage being a covenant bond. In other texts, “But you say, Why does he not? “Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal 2:14). Malachi is drawing an analogy between the covenant unfaithfulness of Israel toward God and the marriage covenant faithlessness between the husbands and wives of Judah.

“As at Adam, they have broken the covenant; they were unfaithful to me there” (Hosea 6:7 NIV).” In this passage, Adam is referred to as a person and “there” is a place, probably the Garden of Eden. The prophet Hosea declares that as Israel has broken their covenant with God in the same manner that Adam and Eve broke their creation covenant in the Garden in Genesis 3.⁷

The book of Proverbs speaks of the adulterous woman as breaking her marriage covenant by her sinful actions, “She has abandoned her husband and ignores the covenant she made before God” (2:17). We see from these texts that marriage is described as a covenant bond of steadfast love. Therefore, marriage is not contractual relationship based on performance, but a bond of a covenant relationship based on committed love and lifelong fidelity. Why is this distinction important?

Covenant versus Contract

In today’s Western societies, many couples see marriage as a contract, the relationship is dependent on the other spouse satisfying their emotional, spiritual, and physical needs. Expectations have reached an all-time high as couples turn from the Lord Jesus Christ as the center of their marriage to looking to one another for spiritual fulfillment and personal satisfaction. A spouse’s need for affection, emotional affirmation and happiness in day-to-day living, places an unrealistic burden on the couple. In many ways, this performance expectation becomes a replacement for God, for the other spouse must meet the other’s deepest romantic needs and heart-felt desires, or the relationship contract will be irrevocably broken. Lauren Winner, Duke Divinity School professor, notes:

When we are “in love” with someone we often appear to attend to our beloved when in fact we are doing the very opposite. Instead of being attentive we are acquisitive. We use the other for our own glorification and we bask in the presence of our beloved because we enjoy the image of ourselves that is reflected back. . . . This is the opposite of Christian love. The opposite is all about me. Even idolizing my beloved—certainly a danger for the newly infatuated—is all about me, though it pretends to be all about the other, it is all about me because it

⁶ Ibid. 21

⁷ Ibid. 20

does not take my beloved seriously as a person created and redeemed by God but rather imagines him to be perfect, heroic, sublime, and customized to meet my needs.⁸

In essence, the marriage relationship has become a counterfeit god, an idol, replacing God as the main supplier for emotional and spiritual needs. “A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”⁹ As pastors, we have observed many dating couples’ break-ups and some marital divorces, though the word, “idolatry,” sounds harsh that is exactly what the relationship had become—a counterfeit for what only God can provide—true fulfillment.

What are the marks of genuine marriage covenant?

First: Covenants, not contracts, are initiated for the benefit of the other person. A spouse’s immediate needs are not what come first. Love dictates that the other partner comes first. Love being the passionate, unselfish choice for the highest good of God and others without concern for reward or recognition. Love is grace, the person Jesus, the one who enables us to treat others as he would treat them.

Second: In a covenant relationship, the wedding couple makes unconditional promises that are intended to be kept even during the deepest, most troubling moments of life.

Third: Steadfast love marks a covenant relationship, the partners refuse to focus on the failures of the other spouse, the couple chooses to serve, love, and forgive each other.

Fourth: The covenant relationship is viewed as a commitment that is permanent and calls for perseverance during the up’s and down’s and in’s and out’s of life. Biblical teaching is that one man and one woman are married to each other for life: no escape clauses, no red-lines, and no running away.

Fifth: Covenant relationships require confrontation and forgiveness. In a covenant relationship, both partners recognized that they are sinners saved by grace and that constant forgiveness is needed to keep the relationship strong and Christ-centered. Covenant marriage is God’s plan. There may be contracts within the framework of daily life in a covenant marriage, but for the Christian, marriage is a covenant, a relationship based on love and mutual affection, not performance or goal-keeping. “The foundation of covenant-keeping love between a man and a woman is the unbroken covenant between them and God.”¹⁰

“Marriage is not a mainly about staying in love. It’s about covenant keeping. And the main reason it is about covenant-keeping is that God designed the relationship between a husband and

⁸ Lauren Winner, “The Countercultural Path” in *Five Paths to the Love of Your Life*, ed. A. Chediak (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2005), 38.

⁹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* 9 (New York: Dutton, 2009), xviii.

¹⁰ John Piper, “Stripped in Shame, Clothed in Grace,” *Marriage, Christ, and Covenant: One Flesh for the Glory of 10 God* sermon series (Desiring God Ministries, February 4, 2007).

wife to represent the relationship between Christ and the church. This is the deepest meaning of marriage.”¹¹ Love is the centerpiece of a Biblical covenant. What kind of love, do we mean?

Holy Matrimony as Bond of a Covenant Love

When the Yahweh declares, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [*hesed*] for thousandth generation” (Ex 34:6-7a), the writer in this verse is referring to God’s covenant love by using the Hebrew word, *hesed*. The phrases, “lovingkindness, covenant faithfulness, or steadfast love” are used in many English translations, but an even deeper meaning exists, that meaning is “bond of a covenant love.” Therefore, the word, “love,” as is being used in this position paper necessarily implies commitment, faithfulness, and steadfastness.

In general, one may identify three basic meanings of the word (*hesed*), which always interact: “strength,” “steadfastness,” and “love.” Any understanding of the word that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness. “Love” by itself easily becomes sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant. Yet “strength” or “steadfastness” suggests only the fulfillment of a legal or other obligation. . . . But *hesed* is not only a matter of obligation; it is also of generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy.¹²

Covenant love is devoting ourselves to the well-being of another no matter their response, positive or negative, no matter how inconvenient the need, or sacrificial the personal cost. To love unselfishly is to share in God’s own life, it is to experience the bond of a covenant love.

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a wedding homily for some dear friends who were getting married. A sermon that Bonhoeffer could not deliver because of his unjust captivity at Tegel prison located in Berlin, Germany. The homily was smuggled out by a sympathetic guard, it was entitled, “A Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell,” and taken from Eph 1:12.

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God’s holy institution through which God wishes to preserve humanity until the end of time. In your love you see only each other in the world; in marriage you are a link in the chain of generations that God, for the sake of God’s glory, allows to rise and fade away, and calls into God’s kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness; in marriage you are placed and given responsibility within the world and the human community. Your love belongs only to you personally; marriage is something beyond the personal, an estate, an office. Just as it takes a crown to make a king and not just his will to reign, so it takes marriage and not just your love for each other to make you a married couple both in human and in God’s eyes.¹³

¹¹ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2009), 102.

¹² W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr., eds., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), Logos Edition.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBW, Vol. 8 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 13 2009), Kindle Edition, Locations 2444-2450.

The Bible, and the Church Catholic, agree with Bonhoeffer that married love is a covenant love, that married love is not based on performance, that married love is more than just love for each other, that married love is more than a feeling, and that married love is not just about the couple, but a responsibility of God to the whole human community past, present and future.