

The Marriage Covenant

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:

This newsletter begins a series of biblically based studies on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. When I proposed this topic, many of you expressed wholehearted support. It is my fervent hope and prayer that these studies will meet your expectations and contribute to strengthen your home.

There is hardly a Christian family that directly or indirectly has not known the pain of divorce. Divorce is no longer a disease contracted by Hollywood movie stars. It affects people from all walks of life, including an increasing number of Seventh-day Adventists. This stark reality has been brought home to me through my itinerant ministry across North America and overseas. It has become a common but disturbing sight for me to look over congregations while I preach and see large numbers of single parents. In some congregations local pastors have told me that the number of broken homes outnumbers those which have not yet experienced the tragedy of divorce.

An important factor contributing to the alarming escalation of divorce among Christians is the growing acceptance of the societal view of marriage as a social contract governed by the laws of the land rather than a sacred covenant regulated by the higher moral law of God. Marriage is no longer seen by many people as a sacred covenant witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself, but rather as a social contract that can easily be terminated.

The “no fault” divorce law makes it possible to put asunder what God has united, for less than the price of a good suit. This trend is influencing Christians to believe that divorce is a guiltless, and at times, proper procedure.

Need to Recover the Biblical view of Marriage. To counteract the secularization and easy dissolution of marriage, it is imperative to recover the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, life-long covenant. The recovery of this view can help Christians resist the societal trend to consider divorce as an easy solution to their marital problems. To accomplish this objective we need to engage all the preaching, teaching, and counseling resources that Christian churches possess.

An important avenue that can effectively propagate the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, permanent covenant is Christian literature. There is an urgent need for literature articulating, not the cultural, but the Biblical view of marriage, sex, divorce, and remarriage. I became aware of this urgent need while reviewing the extensive literature on this subject in researching for my book *The Marriage Covenant*. To my surprise I found that most of the literature treats marriage, divorce and remarriage from purely sociological, psychological, medical, and economic perspectives. The few books written from a Christian perspective seldom offer an adequate analysis of what the Bible really teaches on this subject. There are scholarly studies dealing with problematic texts and words, but these studies are usually technical in nature and without practical application to our contemporary marriage situations.

The result is that many Christians today do not know for sure what the Bible really teaches in the area of marriage, sex, divorce, and remarriage. Many are asking important questions such as: “What is the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian marriage? What guidance does the Bible offer on how to build up a strong marriage covenant relationship? Does the Bible clearly teach role distinctions between husband and wife? Does the Bible view the function of sex as exclusively procreational or also as

relational? Is it Biblically right or wrong to use contraceptives? Are there Biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage? Is a Christian who remarries guilty of continuous adultery? When marital relationships become intolerable, should a Christian couple suffer the pain of divorce or the tragedy of maintaining a marriage without love? Should a minister who has divorced and remarried be allowed to continue to serve as a pastor? Should a minister marry divorced people and should remarried people automatically be accepted into church membership?"

Search for Biblical Answers. Questions such as these trouble many sincere Christians who are seeking truly Biblical answers. They want to know what guidance, if any, the Word of God offers to these perplexing questions affecting so many lives. The confusion is partly caused by the cultural transition in which we live. Old values are being challenged today inside and outside the church by secularistic and humanistic ideologies. Sometimes even pastors, teachers, and Christian writers contribute to the prevailing confusion by interpreting the Bible more in the light of their cultural values than in the light of a serious study of what the Bible actually teaches regarding these perplexing questions.

It is the awareness of the urgent need for literature to help Christians find true Biblical answers to important questions regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, that has motivated me to devote one year of my life to undertake this research. The results of my investigation have been published in the book ***The Marriage Covenant: A Biblical Study on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage***. From the outset, my aim has been to provide a definite and concrete understanding of the Biblical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

The responses I have received from readers of the book has been very encouraging. The other day I received a letter from a lady who told me that she read the book, underlined relevant sections, and mailed it to her estranged husband who had moved into another state. Jubilantly she wrote that after reading the book, her husband decided to come back to her and now they are reunited. Letters such as these encourage me to continue my ministry of Biblical research.

My plan is to share with you some of the highlights of my book ***The Marriage Covenant*** during the next five or six newsletters. If you prefer to read the book itself, feel free to call me at (616) 471-2915, and we will gladly mail you immediately the new reprint with laminated cover that came off the press recently.

NEW BOOK ON CHRISTIAN MUSIC

You will be pleased to know that the new book *The Christian and Rock Music: A Study of Biblical Principles of Music (384 pages)*, is being printed and is scheduled to be delivered to us by April 24-25. I am emailing you separately a news release with a picture of the book and order information. To express my gratitude to the many of you who have encouraged me through this project, and have given me valuable constructive criticism, I decided to offer you the book to all the members of the **Endtime Issues** at a discounted price and to autograph personally the first 500 copies.

SABBATH SCHOOL COMMENTS

This quarter our Sabbath School Quarterly deals with "The Certainty of the Second Advent." As you may know, I have written a book *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness* (384 pages), which contains much valuable information missing in the quarterly. This book represents for me several years of dedicated research on the certainty and imminence of Christ's Return. Some people believe that this book may prove to be one of my most influential publications.

Would you like me to post some of the highlights of the book relevant to the weekly lesson? You may recall that I did post some comments about the themes of the lesson in the past, and I would be glad to do it again. Let me know what you think of the idea.

THE MARRIAGE COVENANT

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D., Prof. of Theology, Andrews University

The Christian home is in trouble. There is hardly a Christian family that directly or indirectly has not known the pain of divorce. An important factor contributing to the alarming escalation of divorce among Christians is the growing acceptance of the societal view of marriage as a social contract governed by the laws of the land rather than a sacred covenant regulated by the higher moral law of God.

It is noteworthy that a study conducted by two sociologists from Ohio State University, Kenneth Chi and Sharon K. Houseknecht, indicates that the rate of divorce among Catholics is three times lower than the national average. The reason given is that Catholics have such a deep rooted theological conviction that marriage is an indissoluble, sacramental union that discourages the possibility of divorce.

I believe that to counteract the secularization and easy dissolution of marriage, it is imperative for Christians to recover the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, life-long covenant. The recovery of this view can help Christians resist the societal trend to consider divorce as an easy solution to their marital problems. To accomplish this objective I spent a year researching the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred covenant. My plan is to share some of the highlights from my book ***The Marriage Covenant***, hoping that it contribute to strengthen the Christian home.

In this first segment we shall consider the importance of a marriage covenant as a real and solid foundation upon which to build a permanent and happy marriage. If you miss any of the segments, you can readily access them at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com>. The newsletters are available both in HTML format and Adobe PDF version. The latter is useful for those who want to print out the newsletters.

The Foundation of Marriage. Marriage is like a house. If it is to last, it needs a solid foundation. The bedrock upon which the foundation of marriage must rest is an unconditional, mutual covenant that allows no external or internal circumstances to "put asunder" the marital union that God Himself has established. This covenantal commitment and conviction that God has united our lives in holy matrimony give us reasons to believe that He will enable us to stay together, even when our marriages appear to be "for worse." It is this covenant foundation that will motivate us to seek God's help in trying again to make successes of our marriages, even when our needs are unfulfilled and our relationships seem to be sterile or sour.

It is this covenantal foundation that is often lacking in Christian marriages today. "What is missing in most marriages today," perceptively observes Paul Stevens, "is what the Bible identifies as the heart of marriage: a covenant. Everything is superstructure. Understanding expectations, developing good communication (especially sexual), gaining skills in conflict resolution, discovering appropriate roles or creating new ones, making our marriages fun and free, becoming spiritual friends and sharing a ministry--these are the walls, the roof, the wiring, the plumbing and the heating. They are essential to the whole. But if there is no foundation, they will collapse with the whole building."

The foundation ensuring the stability and permanence of marriage is the mutual commitment of a couple to cleave to one another "for better and for worse." The Biblical concept of a lifelong, permanent bond between a husband and a wife is quickly becoming an outdated, foreign concept. More and more couples enter the marriage relationship believing that it is terminable. They interpret the promise "Till death do us part" as meaning "Till disagreement or other interests do us part."

To resist this societal trend which is undermining the foundation of marriage, we must recover and reaffirm the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred and permanent covenant. Declaring our permanent commitment to each other not only on the wedding day, but periodically throughout our lives (especially on the wedding anniversary and each other's birthday) will help us to preserve our marriage covenant.

A covenant marriage is not a relational prison locking a man and a woman into a permanent relationship. It is rather, to quote Paul Stevens again, "an elastic link between two hearts. When they move apart, a tug reminds them they belong. Or, a covenant is a net beneath two trapeze artists. It is a risky business, this high-wire stunt, and they will undoubtedly fall sometime. But the safety net beneath them holds."

A Covenant of Faith. A marriage covenant is a covenant of faith because no Christian spouse knows for sure how their marriages are going to work out. What spouses can know for sure is whether or not they have solemnly committed themselves before God to a lifelong covenantal partnership in which they shall belong together as long as they both shall live. This covenant can only be made by spouses who share a common faith in God and in His ability to work out His purpose in their marriage. Sharing this common faith provides the courage to believe that God will help us to make our marriages work, even when they seem hopelessly doomed.

A Christian couple contemplating marriage needs to determine whether or not they are prepared fully and freely to enter into a lifelong marriage covenant. Discerning covenantal compatibility is more important than determining personal compatibility. When a mutual and strong covenant commitment exists, the possibility of resolving conflicts within marriage also exists. A covenantal marriage is not completely without conflicts. Total commitment to your mate does not eliminate the possibility of tensions, tears, disagreements, impatience, and conflicts. That is the bad news. But the good news is that by the grace of God, no marital conflict is beyond solution. A couple fully committed to God and to one another can rest in the assurance that God will provide the enabling power of His Spirit to resolve conflicts and restore harmony.

There are many people legally married today who have never made a covenantal commitment to their spouses. At the time of their legal marriages, some of them were not emotionally mature enough to solemnly make before God that lifelong covenant commitment. Whatever the original reason may have been for failing to enter into a marriage covenant, now is the time to make such a covenant, even if you are experiencing a good marriage. A refusal to make a marriage covenant indicates a flaw in your commitment to your spouse. That flaw is like a tiny crack that can be fatally widened by sinister forces working to destroy marriage. To avoid such a risk, we must recover and reaffirm the Biblical understanding of marriage as a lifelong sacred covenant, witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself.

A Covenant Under Attack. Four major social forces today are conspiring to undermine the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred covenant, reducing it instead to a temporary social contract governed by civil laws and terminated when it no longer meets the expectations of one or both spouses.

Secularism has caused the loss of the sense of the sacred in various realms of life, including marriage. For example, the Lord's Day is no longer viewed by many Christians as a "holy day" but rather as a "holiday," a day to seek for personal pleasure and profit, rather than for the presence and peace of God. Life is no longer sacred for many people, as over 1,500,000 induced abortions are performed every year in the United States alone, besides the countless number of persons killed everywhere by senseless crimes, drugs and violence. Similarly, marriage is no longer regarded by many as a lifelong, sacred covenant witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself, but rather as a temporary social contract, governed solely by civil laws.

Humanism teaches that marriage is a human and not a divine institution. Its function is to meet a person's needs: social, sexual, emotional, and financial. Accordingly, when such needs are no longer met, the marriage contract can be legitimately terminated.

Selfism tells us that we have the right to reach self-fulfillment, self-sufficiency, and self-development. If marriage becomes a stumbling block to self-actualization, it must be dissolved. Fritz Perls expresses it in this way: "I do my thing, and you do your thing. I

am not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you are not in this world to live up to mine. And if by some chance we meet, it's beautiful."

To resist the various social forces which are conspiring to break apart the marriage covenant, reducing it to a temporary relationship of convenience, Christians must recover and reaffirm the Biblical understanding of marriage as a lifelong, sacred covenant, witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself. To help us understand more fully how to live out the marriage covenant, we shall examine first the nature of its commitment and then the ten commandments of the marriage covenant.

The Commitment of the Marriage Covenant

Total Commitment. To accept marriage as a sacred covenant means first of all to be willing to make a total commitment of ourselves to our marriage partners. This is why Paul in Ephesians compares marriage to the relationship of Christ with His church (Eph 5:25-26). Christ's commitment to us, the church, is so total that He loved us while we were yet unfaithful (Rom 5:8) and gave up His life that we may live (Eph 5:25).

When Christian couples enter into a marriage covenant, they are committing themselves to maintaining their marital union, no matter what. This total commitment is set forth in the marriage vows: "for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health."

By taking the marriage vows, Christian mates promise to each other what is well expressed by Elizabeth Achtemeier: "I will be with you, no matter what happens to us and between us. If you should become blind tomorrow, I will be there. If you achieve no success and attain no status in our society, I will be there. When we argue and are angry, as we inevitably will, I will work to bring us together. When we seem totally at odds and neither of us is having needs fulfilled, I will persist in trying to understand and in trying to restore our relationship. When our marriage seems utterly sterile and going nowhere at all, I will believe that it can work and I will want it to work and I will do my part to make it work. And when all is wonderful and we are happy, I will rejoice over our life together, and continue to strive to keep our relationship growing and strong."

Such a total commitment is possible only by divine grace. It is God who gives us power to hold fast to our commitment. This is the unseen factor often ignored in marriage manuals. What is true for salvation is also true for a committed marriage: there is both a divine initiative and a human response. As Paul puts it, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13). We must work to achieve total and permanent commitment in our marriages and yet recognize that it is God who is at work in and through us to make this goal possible.

Exclusive Commitment. To accept marriage as a sacred covenant means also to be willing to make an exclusive commitment of ourselves to our marital partners. It means, as the marriage vows put it, "to forsake all others" and "to keep thee only unto her [or him], so long as you both shall live." This understanding of the marriage covenant is under severe attack in our sexually permissive society where immoral connotations of illicit sexual acts have been eliminated through the introduction of new "softer" terms. Fornication is now referred to as "premarital sex," with the emphasis on the "pre" rather than on the "marital." Adultery is now called "extramarital sex," implying an additional experience, like an extraprofessional activity.

A landmark survey of 100,000 women conducted by Redbook Magazine and supervised by sociologist Robert Bell of Temple University, indicates that about one third of all married women and almost half (47%) of wage-earning wives reported "having sexual relations with men other than their husbands." Considering that men tend to be more promiscuous than women, we can safely assume that the percentage of married men having extramarital relations is even higher.

In view of the prevailing violation of marital vows, as Christians we face today an unprecedented challenge to maintain by God's grace our exclusive commitment to our marriage partners. Exclusive commitment extends beyond the sexual sphere and includes

forming relationships with friends or relatives closer than those with our spouses. By taking third parties into the confidences of our marital life, we undermine the exclusiveness of our marital commitments. Ellen White warns that "When a woman relates her family troubles or complaints of her husband to another man, she violates her marriage vows; she dishonors her husband and breaks down the wall erected to preserve the sanctity of the marriage relation; she throws wide open the door and invites Satan to enter with his insidious temptations. This is just as Satan would have it."

Continuing Commitment. To accept marriage as a sacred covenant also means to be willing to make a continuing commitment to one's marital partner. Time changes things, including our looks and our feelings. When my fiancée accepted my marriage proposal, I was rather thin with nice wavy hair. Thirty years later I find myself considerably heavier with a shining top. I am thankful to God that the change in my looks has not caused my wife to change her commitment to me. Marital commitment must continue through the changing seasons of our lives. With each change in our lives, our marital commitments must be renewed.

To speak today of a continuing commitment may seem naive when about half of all American marriages are dissolved by divorce or annulment every year.⁸ Yet, to approach marriage with an openness to divorce is to deny the Biblical meaning of the one-flesh, permanent covenantal relationship. In His response to the question raised over divorce, Jesus was unequivocal in affirming that marriage is a continuing, lasting commitment: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9).

A young couple contemplating marriage needs to consider whether or not both are prepared to make a continuing commitment to one another. But a continuing commitment to our marriage partners is not accomplished once and for all. It must be reaffirmed each day, when we are healthy or sick, wealthy or poor, happy or sad, successful or failing. In all the changing moods of life, we must determine by God's grace to reaffirm our marriage commitments until death doth us part.

Sometime ago, a woman told me that she had filed for divorce because her feelings toward her husband had changed. She did not feel in love with him anymore. The counsel of Ellen White to such people is to change their dispositions, not their marriage partners: "If your dispositions are not congenial, would it not be for the glory of God for you to change these dispositions?" The good news of the Gospel is that our feelings and dispositions can be changed through Christ's enabling power (Phil 4:13). Divine grace makes a continuing commitment to marriage not a possibility, but a reality.

Growing Commitment. To accept marriage as a sacred covenant means also to experience a growing commitment which deepens and matures through life's experiences. The Christian life is a call to grow "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13), until we love with the fullness of His love. The same call applies to our marriage relationships. There must be a maturing and deepening of our commitment to each other. When marriage commitment stops growing, it begins to wither away.

Growth in commitment to marriage is not achieved overnight. It is a continuous daily process lasting through the whole course of our married lives. It involves, among other things, following the model of Christ's love for His church by being willing to sacrifice selfish wants for the good of the other, being willing to love even when love is not reciprocated. It involves also accepting unsuspected flaws in the character of our partners and working together to resolve misunderstandings, tensions, or hostilities.

Growth in our marital commitment often takes place through deaths and resurrections. There are times in our marital relationship when communication becomes very difficult, if not impossible. Hurt, hostility, and resentment seem to prevail. Yet, as we learn by God's grace to put to death and to bury all such ill-feeling, out of that dying, new life comes in our relationship.

The sad reality is that many marriages do not grow in maturity and love. Rather than expending energies to keep their relationships improving, some marriage partners

settle down into a dull drum routine. To find a way out of such dullness, some partners seek for excitement and growth in extramarital relationships. In so doing, however, they only add misery to their lives by violating their marriage covenant and by putting asunder the marital unity formed by God.

Conclusion. To live out marriage as a sacred covenant means to be willing to make a total, exclusive, continuing and growing commitment to our marriage partner. When we commit ourselves to honor by God's grace our marriage covenant of mutual faithfulness until death, then we will experience how God is able mysteriously to unite two lives into "one flesh."

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Covenant marriage is a legally distinct kind of marriage in three states (Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana) of the United States, in which the marrying spouses agree to obtain pre-marital counseling and accept more limited grounds for later seeking divorce (the least strict of which being that the couple lives apart from each other for two years). Louisiana became the first state to pass a covenant marriage law in 1997; shortly afterwards, Arkansas and Arizona followed suit. Since its inception, very The first marriage covenant was achieved when God united Adam and Eve in the first wedding. Later Jesus expressed the importance of the marriage covenant when He said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?" Then Jesus added, "Consequently they are no more two but one flesh. Covenant is the fundamental tool that God has designed to order His relationship with mankind. In This Series: 1. Covenant: The Heart of the Marriage Mystery. 2. Reflecting Our Relationship With God. 3. God's Design for Marriage. Part of the understanding of the "Why" of this mystery can be found in the understanding of covenant, which is the vehicle by which a man and a woman are to establish the lifelong, faithful relationship in which physical sexual interaction is meant to operate.