

The Christian Home (3): The Nature of Marriage

Marriage is a lifelong covenant between a man and woman, whereby they become one flesh and establish their own family distinct from their parents.

I. The Nature of Marriage

1. *Marriage is a covenant.* "God's relationship to us through Christ is covenantal and our marriages are a picture of that truth" (Wilson).¹ A covenant is a relationship bound by promise. "The LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Mal.2:14). Marriage is a covenant between two people made in the presence of God. Thus, Solomon speaks of the immoral woman, "who forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God" (Prov.2:17). Marriage is a covenant of God not only because it's from God but also because it's before God. "The LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth." God witnesses every wedding. As covenants and oaths are similar (if not synonymous), wedding vows invoke the presence of God. At the heart of every marriage, is a sacred bond. "Marriage was instituted by God, blessed by God, and is also witnessed by God" (Beeke).²

The marriage covenant is called the covenant of God (Prov.2:17; Mal.2:14): first, because He is the author of it, as He is the ordainer of that state; second, because He is a witness to it; thirdly, because He will avenge the breach of it. How severely does God avenge the quarrel of His covenant!³

What do people swear or promise one another in the covenant of marriage? "When a man and a woman enter into holy matrimony before the Lord, they promise to fulfill the duties of marriage without conditions and without reservations" (Beeke).⁴ What God said of Israel is true of marriage as well: "I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine, says the LORD God" (Ezek.16:8). "Marriage is a covenant between two persons to become each other's loving companions for life" (Adams).⁵ A man and woman say the same thing the church says of Christ, "My beloved is mine, and I am His" (Song 2:16). An adulterer is a covenant breaker. He breaks covenant with God and his wife.

Marriage must be entered into as a covenant in which a husband and wife promise before God to perform the duties that God has assigned to each. The husband promises to faithfully love his wife as Christ loves His church, to serve her, comfort her, honor and cherish her, and forsaking all others keep faith with her as long as they both shall live. The wife promises to love her husband, comfort him, respect and submit to him as the church submits to Christ, and forsaking all others keep faith with him as long as they both shall live.⁶

2. *Marriage is a lifelong covenant.* "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt.19:6). "Man and wife are joined together by an unbreakable bond. It must never be cut apart till death cuts it. Body and soul must be severed from one another before husband and wife" (Gouge).⁷

¹ Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage*, 12

² Joel Beeke, *Living in a Godly Marriage*, 90

³ George Swinnoock, *Works*, 1:469

⁴ Joel Beeke, *Living in a Godly Marriage*, 89

⁵ Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*, 13

⁶ Joel Beeke, *Living in a Godly Marriage*, 89

⁷ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 1:137

"The heart of a marriage covenant is a lifelong, life-and-death promise to provide companionship and fellowship" (Scipione).⁸ "For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband" (Rom.7:2). "Marriage is the lawful conjunction of one man and one woman for the term of their natural lives" (Swinnock).⁹

However, most Reformed Christians believe Scripture allows for divorce (and remarriage) for two reasons. "Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God has joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage" (WCF).¹⁰ "Since marriage is a covenant of companionship, the only proper grounds for divorce are those which absolutely contradict its identity as such. Accordingly, only desertion and adultery provide grounds for divorce" (Waldron).¹¹ "Even though all divorces are the result of sin, not all divorces are sinful" (Adams).¹²

(1) Adultery. "In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead" (WCF).¹³ The OT permitted and regulated divorce. "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt.19:8). Marriage was intended to be unbreakable. It was only because of man's sinfulness, that Moses (God) allowed or permitted divorce (Lev.21:7, 14; 22:13; Num.30:9; Deut.22:19, 29; 24:1-4). As adultery was punished by death (Lev.20:10), men divorced their wives for reasons other than adultery (Deut.24:1). This is why divorce was regulated (permitted) by God. Within the NT it became evident divorce was lawful only in the case of adultery.

(a) The example of God. God Himself divorced Israel for her spiritual adultery. "Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also" (Jer.3:8). "By His example, God Himself recognized (and thereby taught us) that divorce for the sexual sin of adultery is an option" (Adams).¹⁴ (b) The example of Joseph. "Then Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly (as he thought she committed adultery)" (Matt.1:19). (c) The teaching of Christ. "I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery" (Matt.19:9; 5:31-32).

(2) Desertion. "If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace (i.e., not continued conflict with our unbelieving spouse)" (1Cor.7:15). It's wrong to divorce someone because they are not a believer. "If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her" (1Cor.7:12). But if the unbelieving spouse departs, then the believer is free to divorce and remarry. "If the unbeliever willfully departs, the believer is not under any obligation to pursue the deserting spouse and is freed from all marital debts and duties" (Murray).¹⁵ "Here Paul releases the Christian spouse, once the non-

⁸ George Scipione, *The Battle for the Biblical Family*, 44

⁹ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:464

¹⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith, 24:6

¹¹ Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 355

¹² Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*, 30

¹³ Westminster Confession of Faith, 24:5

¹⁴ Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*, 71

¹⁵ John Murray, *Divorce*, 68-69

Christian partner has separated himself or will not permit his mate to lead a Christian life, giving the former the right and authority to marry another partner" (Luther).¹⁶ Thus, the unbeliever "is not bound" (under bondage) to the marital covenant. "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed" (1Cor.7:27). "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives" (1Cor.7:39). To be "bound" to someone is to be bound by marriage, and to be "unbound" is to be freed from marriage. "If someone is not bound, he is free and released. If he is free and released, he may change his status, just as though his spouse were dead" (Luther).¹⁷

3. *Marriage is between a man and woman.* "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'" (Matt.19:4-5). "Because God created Adam and Eve, homosexuality is excluded. And because God created just one woman for Adam, polygamy is excluded" (Wilson).¹⁸ Thus, Scripture never commands or commends polygamy. It violates the creation account, was invented by a wicked man, and violates the clear teaching of the NT. "Polygamy was instituted by man, and not by God. The first record of a polygamous union was Lamech (Gen.4:19), with no hint of divine approval. But most important, polygamy does not fit with the creation ordinance of marriage or with the picture given in the NT of Christ and the church" (Wilson).¹⁹

How do we explain the practice of OT saints? Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon all had multiple wives. William Gouge said, "This was their sin, and a great blemish in them." He then added two points: first, many inconveniences followed polygamy. "Much mischief must follow upon having more wives than one, for, whereas God at first made a wife to be as a help to man, two or more wives cannot but be a great grief and irritation to him by reason of the rivalry that is between them." Second, this was overlooked by God in a similar way as divorce. "The common error of the time and their insatiable desire of children made them fall into it."²⁰ Thus, while polygamy was sinful, God permitted it for a season.

4. *Marriage is a relationship that results in one flesh.* "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Matt.19:5). "Marriage is the lawful conjunction of the two married persons; that is, of one man and one woman into one flesh" (Perkins).²¹ The two, a man and woman, become one flesh in three ways: (1) physically. "At its most elementary level becoming one flesh refers to sexual relations or physical union" (Mack).²² "Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'the two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh'" (1Cor.6:16). (2) Practically. In marriage the lives of two people become one. "God's intention is that when two people get married they should share everything—their bodies, their possessions, their insights, their ideas, their abilities, their problems, their successes, their sufferings, and their failures" (Mack).²³ (3) Purposefully. In marriage two people join together to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen.1:28). Their collective purpose is dominion. "Marriage and children are not for the sole purpose of fun or recreation, but for godly dominion" (Scipione).²⁴ Their common goal is to raise "godly offspring" (Mal.2:15).

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Works*, 28:36

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Works*, 28:36

¹⁸ Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage*, 14

¹⁹ Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage*, 14-15

²⁰ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 1:138

²¹ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:123

²² Wayne Mack, *Strengthening your Marriage*, 6

²³ Wayne Mack, *Strengthening your Marriage*, 6

²⁴ George Scipione, *The Battle for the Biblical Family*, 45

Thus, there's no human relationship closer than marriage. Given that "God has thus closely knit man and wife together and made them one flesh," William Gouge suggested three applications: first, this shows that the transgressions of man and wife against one another are the most heinous of all, more than of friend, fellow, brother, child, parent, or any other. He who hates his wife, hates his own body. Second, this also shows how horrible a thing it is to sow any seeds of discord and debate between man and wife. "They are the devil's instruments and a diabolical spirit is in them. For Satan most labors to untie those knots which the Lord knits most firmly. Step-children and friends of either spouse may be much at fault here." Third, this close tie is a great motive to stir them both up, to perform cheerfully all the duties which God requires of either of them. "For by this they do their duty and show kindness to their own flesh."²⁵

5. *Marriage results in a family, distinct from their parents.* In marriage, a man and woman leave their father and mother and form their own family. "When a man marries, he can no longer sustain the same relationship to his parents that he once did. It must change. He must now become the head of a new decision-making unit that we call the family" (Adams).²⁶ But what does it mean to leave your father and mother? Wayne Mack clarifies what it does not mean: "It does not mean that you abandon or utterly forsake them (Ex.20:12; Mk.7:9-13; 1Tim.5:8), nor does it mean that you must make a great geographical move."²⁷ He then says, "To leave your parents means that your relationship to your parents must be radically changed." He suggests six ways: (1) you establish an adult relationship with them; (2) you must be more concerned about your mate's ideas, opinions, and practices than those of your parents; (3) we must not be slavishly dependent on your parents for affection, approval, assistance, and counsel; (4) you must eliminate any bad attitudes toward your parents, or you will be tied emotionally to them regardless how far you live from them; (5) you must stop trying to change your mate simply because your parents don't like the way he is; (6) you make the husband-and-wife relationship your priority human relationship.²⁸

Yes, you should be concerned about being a good son/daughter—or mother/father, but you should be more concerned about being a good husband/wife than about being a good son/daughter or father/mother. Children do not need indulgent parents who continually neglect each other. They need parents who will demonstrate how to face and solve problems. They need parents who will show them how to be good husbands and wives, how to relate to other people.

If you are parents, your goal should be to prepare your children to leave, not to stay. Your life must not be wrapped around them or you may make them emotional cripples. You should be preparing yourselves for the day when your children leave by cultivating common interests, by learning to do things together, and by deepening your friendship with each other.

When your children have married, you must not try to run their lives. You must allow the young husband to be the head of his home, to make decisions for himself, to look to his wife, not you, as his primary responsibility and helper. You must encourage your daughter to depend upon her husband, not you, for guidance, help, companionship, and affection.²⁹

²⁵ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 1:139-140

²⁶ Jay Adams, *Christian Living in the Home*, 51-52

²⁷ Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 2

²⁸ Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 2-3

²⁹ Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 3