

COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

SUMMARY

This paper will look at the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. In this covenant we see a transformation of the parties: they come out from under their parents' authority to become man and wife before God. Their legal identity changes and they assume new roles, responsibilities and privileges.

THE KEY IDEA

A covenant is NOT a contract (as we normally think).

A contract is an agreement between identified parties. A contract is a transaction.

A covenant is an agreement that changes the identity of the parties. A covenant is a transformation.

The concept of transforming one's identity is novel to some. Western thinking has moved to the principle of inalienable human rights from birth regardless of age, gender or station in life. This has not always been the case. The foundation of Western civilization is Judeo-Christian belief as taught in the Bible. In the Bible rights and privileges are not the same for all people and vary depending on age, gender, and many other criteria. As we will see, the Bible shows it is possible to change one's identity through covenant. As would be expected, changing one's identity changes one's rights, privileges, and station in life.

THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is a covenant. The Bible says:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and they will become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)

The bride and the groom are considered part of their respective parents' families and under their parents' authority until they are married. In Biblical teaching when a boy grows past adolescence to manhood he is not considered by God to have left his father's household. If he physically leaves home and starts a new life, he is still part of his father's household just farther away. He may be no longer a child or an adolescent but he is still reckoned by God to be under the authority of his father. The man can only “leave his father and mother” when he is “united with his wife”.

Why is that? When a child is born to a couple – the child is the literal flesh and blood of his parents. At birth the child is washed in the blood of the mother as it passes through the birth canal. The mother is one flesh with the father – so in effect, legally speaking, the blood upon the child is reckoned as that of the father as well. God looks at the parent's blood on the child and from that moment on the child is under the protection and under the authority of the parents. The child is not owned by the parents, like a chattel or a piece of furniture, but the child is under the stewardship and guardianship of the parents.

How can that change? Again blood comes into it. In the consummation of marriage, when a man and a woman have intercourse for the first time, the hymen of the woman breaks and she sheds blood. The woman's blood applies itself to the skin of the man's flesh in the woman. God sees the blood and recognizes a covenant of marriage between the man and the woman. From that point on the covenant of the guardianship of parents is annulled and the covenant of marriage is instituted.

The man and the woman are no longer under the authority of their parents - they have changed identities and are now one flesh under God – a new person in God's eyes with a new set of rights and privileges. They continue to have a duty to honor their mother and father, but not to obey them.



Symbols are important in marriage. We see the halo over the heads of the bride and groom indicating it is a union between believers in Jesus. A ring is placed on the woman's hand indicating her troth. The man has removed his shoes: he is standing on holy ground – the covenant is witnessed by God. The man's staff has a dove perched in it, showing his intention to rule the wife gently and in love. The woman's head is covered: she is in submission to her father, who is at center giving her away. The groom's head is uncovered: he is in submission to God above.

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SIGNS OF THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

Across the world, marriage is recognized by signs and tokens. The signs of the covenant of marriage have ancient roots and we see similar signs in other covenants in the Bible.

Some examples of tokens of marriage:

- **The shedding of blood**: at consummation - the chief token of marriage
- **Exchanging vows**: there is understanding of the covenant and verbal consent to it
- **Physical touch**: the kiss, the touch of lips to lips; the joining of hands; the marriage bed

- **Sharing a table:** eating together is a sign of intimacy, trust, and mutual bond
- **Changing names:** traditionally the woman adopts her husband's surname
- **Changing clothes:** the woman wears a new dress for the occasion plus her betrothal jewelry
- **Displaying symbols:** rings are exchanged which are worn on a finger; head covering of woman¹
- **Changing residences:** the couple move to a private room or home of their own

The transformations that occur in a marriage:

- **Changing destinies:** the couple live together for the rest of their lives
- **Changing roles:** the wife submits to her husband instead of to her father and mother; the man submits to God rather than to his father and mother; the man protects and loves his wife
- **Changing purpose:** becoming progenitors, having children: the main purpose of marriage!
- **Changing rights:** the authority to raise, to discipline and to teach children
- **Changing responsibilities:** leading, guiding, caring and loving the members of the family

DUTIES OF A HUSBAND AND WIFE IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Guidance is provided in the New Testament regarding the duties of a husband and a wife joined under a covenant of holy matrimony before God. This teaching is God's will for Christian marriage:

- Christian marriage is monogamous: a husband takes only one wife (1 Cor. 7:2);
- Except for prayer and mutual consent each party must permit the other to enjoy intimacy of their body, meaning to come together sexually (1 Cor. 7:5);
- The marriage bed and the sharing of intimacy between a husband and his wife is exclusive; it must not be shared with others - it is holy (Heb. 13:4);
- Wives ought to be submissive to their husbands in the same way that free men ought to obey ruling authorities in the land and slaves ought to obey their masters (1 Peter 2:13 to 3:6);
- Husbands have a duty to treat their wives respectfully and considerately (1 Peter 3:7);
- Husbands have a duty to love their wives sacrificially, as Christ loved the church, who laid down his life for her (Eph. 5:25);
- Husbands and wives give up life options open to single people – they have a duty to comfort each other (1 Cor. 7:32);
- Husbands must be concerned about the affairs of the world, how to please the wife – which means to provide for her and to protect her (1 Corinthians 7:33);

¹ The head covering of the woman is a New Testament commandment (1 Cor. 11:2-10). Sadly it is largely ignored today. Paul teaches the head covering of the woman shows respect to her husband, a sign of his authority.

- The husband is the spiritual leader in the home – he is responsible to teach his wife spiritual things and to instruct her in godliness that she may glorify the Lord (Eph. 5:26-27);
- The wife is to quietly and reverently submit to the husband’s authority (1 Timothy 2:11-12);
- The husband is the head of the home. It is the responsibility of the wife and the children to honor the head of the home. This means to show proper respect inside the home and in the community. (Ephesians 5:23,33);

DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

Ought the covenant of marriage ever to be broken? Jesus instructed the Jews that is not the will of God.

“... ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ ‘What did Moses command you? ...’ Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.’ ‘It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.’ Jesus replied. ‘But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.” So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.’” (Mark 10:2-9)

Can the covenant of marriage be broken? In speaking to Jews under the Law, Jesus taught divorce is permissible in the case of marital unfaithfulness:

“... anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery.” (Matt. 5:32)

Marital unfaithfulness is usually interpreted to mean adultery. However, as we have seen in the previous section, the duties of a Christian husband and wife extend far beyond the minimum requirement to keep the marriage bed holy. It is more likely that unfaithfulness to the duties of marriage will occur for other reasons than adultery. When unfaithfulness occurs, reconciliation is possible through repentance and forgiveness.

Divorce might be permissible to Jews under the Law in certain circumstances, but that does not make it permissible to Christians.

Christian marriage is meant to be a witness of the relationship of Christ’s love for the church (Ephesians 5:29-32). The Lord Jesus will never ‘divorce’ Christians, no matter how much we stray. His love for us is profound, and his forgiveness of our sins is everlasting. The bond between Christ and the Christian is unbreakable because it is sealed with Christ’s blood. Even if our lives are not honoring to him, the Lord will never cast us off. As such, the Christian man and woman must never divorce under any circumstances.

In the case of a marriage where it is impossible for the Christian couple to live together in harmony, the only option provided in Scripture is separation. This comes with strict conditions on the parties:

“To the married I give this command (not I but the Lord):
A wife must not separate from her husband;
but if she does, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband;
and a husband must not divorce his wife.” (1 Cor. 7:10)