

What Is The Importance Of Covenant Marriage?

The Gospel Coalition • Timothy Keller

Consumer or Covenant?

In sharp contrast with our culture, the Bible teaches that the essence of marriage is a sacrificial commitment to the good of the other. That means that love is more fundamentally action than emotion. But in talking this way, there is a danger of falling into the opposite error that characterized many ancient and traditional societies -- seeing marriage as merely a social transaction, a way of doing your duty to family, tribe, and society. Traditional societies made the family the ultimate value in life, and so marriage was a mere transaction that helped your family's interests. By contrast, contemporary Western societies make the individual's happiness the ultimate value, and so marriage becomes primarily an experience of romantic fulfillment. From an ancient near eastern point of view, the people of Israel had much more in common with present-day Asia, Africa, and South America by way of values than with the modern Western world. By way of illustration, I once saw a TV show where an American high school boy was "in love" with a girl who was providing in-home care for his grandmother. The girl was studying nursing, supporting her family back home, and she was South American. In the course of the episode, the girl learned that a family member wasn't doing well and needed her help, forcing her to make a decision: Either stay with her American boy-crush or return to her country and home to care for family member. For the girl, it wasn't a difficult decision; she would go home and that was it. For the boy, though, her decision didn't make sense; how could she so easily discard their "relationship"? The answer: The girl came from a culture that says, "I must do what is best for my family" while the boy came from a culture that says, "I must do what is in the best interest of me." This same cultural difference exists between contemporary American life and that which existed for the people of Israel, as well as for many Christians in the early centuries of the church. It is a generalization, of course, but a generally accurate one.

The Bible, though, sees God as the supreme good—not the individual or the family—and provides us with a view of marriage that intimately unites feeling and duty, passion and promise. That is because at the heart of the Biblical idea of marriage is the covenant.

Throughout history there have always been consumer relationships. Such a relationship lasts only as long as the vendor meets your needs at a cost acceptable to you. If another vendor delivers better services or the same services at a better cost, you have no obligation to stay in a relationship to the original vendor. In consumer relationships, it could be said that the individual's needs are more important than the relationship.

There have also always been covenantal relationships. These are relationships that are binding on us. In a covenant, the good of the relationship takes precedence over the immediate needs of the individual. For example, a parent may get little emotionally out of caring for an infant. But there has always been an enormous social stigma attached

to any parent who gives up their children because rearing them is too hard and unrewarding. For most people, the very idea of that is unthinkable. Why? Society still considers the parent-child relationship to be a covenantal one, not a consumer relationship.

Sociologists argue that in contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal, including marriage. Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit—that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back—then we “cut our losses” and drop the relationship. This has also been called “commodification,” a process by which social relationships are reduced to economic exchange relationships, and so the very idea of “covenant” is disappearing in our culture. Covenant is therefore a concept that is increasingly foreign to us, and yet the Bible says it is the essence of marriage, so we must take some time to understand it.

The Vertical and the Horizontal

The serious reader of the Bible will see covenants literally everywhere throughout the entire book. “Horizontal” covenants were made between human beings. We see them established between close friends ([1 Samuel 18:3](#); [20:16](#)) as well as between nations. But the most prominent covenants in the Bible are “vertical,” covenants made by God with individuals ([Genesis 17:2](#)) as well as with families and peoples ([Exodus 19:5](#)).

But in several ways, the marriage relationship is unique and is the most deeply covenantal relationship possible between two human beings. In [Ephesians 5:31](#), Paul evokes the idea of the covenant when he fully quotes [Genesis 2:24](#), perhaps the most well-known text in the Old Testament regarding marriage.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

There in [Genesis 2:22–25](#) we see the first marriage ceremony. The Genesis text calls what happens “cleaving.” This archaic English term (which you can find in the King James Version) conveys the strength of the Hebrew verb, which modern translations render “united to.” It is a Hebrew word that literally means to be glued to something. Elsewhere in the Bible, the word “cleave” means to unite to someone through a covenant, a binding promise, or oath.

Why do we say that marriage is the most deeply covenantal relationship? It is because marriage has both strong horizontal and vertical aspects to it. In [Malachi 2:14](#), a man is told that his spouse “is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant” (cf. [Ezekiel 16:8](#)). [Proverbs 2:17](#) describes a wayward wife who has “left the partner of her youth, and ignored the covenant she made before God.” The covenant made between a husband and a wife is done “before God” and therefore with God as well as the spouse.

To break faith with your spouse is to break faith with God at the same time.

This is the reason that so many traditional Christian wedding services have both a set of questions as well as a set of vows. In the questions, each spouse is asked something like this:

Will you have this woman to be your wife? And will you make your promise to her in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness—to live with her, and cherish her, according to the ordinance of God, in the holy bond of marriage?

Each spouse answers “I will” or “I do”—but notice they are not speaking to each other. They are looking forward and technically answering the minister, who asks them the questions. What they are really doing is making a vow to God before they turn and make vows to one another. They are “speaking vertically” before they speak horizontally. They get to hear the other person stand up before God, their families, and all the authority structures of church and state and swear loyalty and faithfulness to the other. Now, building on this foundation, they take one another by the hand and say something like this:

I take you to be my lawful and wedded husband, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful wife. In plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.

Imagine a house with an A-frame structure. The two sides of the home meet at the top and hold one another up. But underneath, the foundation holds up both of the sides. So the covenant with and before God strengthens the partners to make a covenant with each other. Marriage is therefore the deepest of human covenants.