

God Marriage and Family: Lesson Four-Three Views of Christian Marriage: Sacramental, Contract, or Covenant

Review: The Old Testament and the New Testament agree that marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and entered into before God. The New Testament builds on and further elaborates on the Old Testament teaching on marriage while cohearing with the divine ideal of marriage presented in the book of Genesis. In the New Testament, God's creational norms revealed in the Old Testament for marriage are set within the larger framework of God's plan of bringing "all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10 and the related chart). Just as Christ has been made head over every human and heavenly authority (1:21), so the husband was put in charge over his wife (5:22-24). This was done by "The Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (3:14-15). According to Paul, this headship implies both the wife's submission to her husband's authority and the husband's loving, sacrificial devotion to his wife. Paul also teaches that it is an indispensable prerequisite for a Christian marriage that both spouses are believers and that they are Spirit-filled as they fulfill their marital roles and obligations. (Kostenberger, p.79)

I.) Sacrament-This view is a product of church tradition. The Greek word "mysterion" is translated "Sacramentum" in the Latin Vulgate. It draws upon the analogy of Christ and the church in Ephesians 5 and the teachings of Augustine in On the Good of Marriage where Augustine lists the three benefits of marriage, namely, offspring, fidelity and sacramental bond. The Roman Catholic Church recast this understanding at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as a church sacrament: God dispenses grace via the church and marriage to the participants. Thus, marriage becomes an efficacious sign pointing to God's presence among his people and bringing about or effecting what it signifies. It is thus affirmed that the participants must approach the sacrament with reverence and faith.

Critique: 1.) The Bible does not portray marriage as a dispenser of divine grace nor is the sacramental blessing of the church to be a prerequisite for Christian marriage. Rather, the Scripture stipulates that participants of Christian marriage must both be new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 4:23-24), that is, born again in Christ (Titus 3:5). 2.) The Creator's purpose for marriage has more to do with the creation of physical life, rather than spiritual life. Marriage does not function "ex opere operato" to confer spiritual graces upon the participants but it does function well to produce physical children. 3.) The sacramental view subjects all Christian marriage to the control of the church which, according to our author, is unbiblical. The institution of marriage and the institution of the church are equally under the headship of Christ, and thus, directly regulated by his word. Christian marriage is sacramental in the Augustinian sense but not a sacrament as per the Roman Catholic Church.

II.) Contract-This view is the one held by most of Western culture and society as well as much of the evangelical Christian church. In the Old Testament, contracts and covenants are virtually equivalent because God was invoked in virtually all agreements between people and between God and man. Now, however, we tend to make a distinction between secular contracts and sacred covenants. The contractual view of marriage is not grounded in scriptural authority. Rather, proponents of this approach view marriage as "a bilateral contract that is voluntarily formed, maintained and dissolved by two individuals." Five characteristics are listed: 1.) Typically are made for a limited period of time; 2.) Most often deals with specific actions; 3.) Are conditional upon the continued performance of contractual obligations by the other partner; 4.) Are entered into for one's own benefit; 5.) Are sometimes unspoken and implicit. The contractual approach to marriage had its origin in the ecclesiastical courts in combination with the thinking of the Enlightenment period. It was not fully developed until the 17th Century. Contractual marriage is rooted in the civil law under the state. It has the option of being Christianized by being performed in a church and being augmented by scriptural terms. So, we hear the minister say, "by the authority vested in me by the state of South Carolina..."

Critique: 1.) This view is not of biblical origin. The classical Latin term "contractus" was not even used of pagan marriages until the High Scholastic period (1250-1350). Prior to that, "foedus" was used for Christian marriage. 2.) This view undermines the strong basis for permanence in marriage. It depends upon the ability of the partners to refrain from sin in order to maintain the bond. If one sins, the other can dissolve the arrangement. This has fostered the ever-increasing ease of divorce which runs counter to the scriptural emphasis on permanence. 3.) This opens the door for variance from the biblical parameters for marriage and for the redefinition of marriage as we have seen. Civil law is malleable according to social mores and the whims of legislators in the civil arena. It is based upon society's changing, and often, degenerate opinions rather than God's absolute standards. Nonetheless, the Bible still views such marriages as valid and binding and people who become Christians in contractual marriages need not reinstitute their marriage. Civil marriage may be as simple as cohabitation.

III.) Covenantal-This is defined as "a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted and publicly entered into before God (whether acknowledged or not), normally consummated by sexual intercourse." It is not merely a bilateral contract but "a sacred bond". It is trilateral or, better yet, three-dimensional. It is not primarily subject to church law or civil law but divine law based upon the authority of God in Scripture. John Stott states it well in his comments on Genesis 2:24: "Christian marriage is the exclusive heterosexual covenant between one man and one woman ordained and sealed by God, preceded by the public leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutually supportive partnership, and normally crowned by the gift of children." Solemn covenants between God and man, man and man, and amongst the members of the Trinity are the scriptural pattern (Proverbs 2:17, Ezekiel 16:8, Malachi 2:14). The exception, as noted previously, is that the marriage covenant ceases with the death of one of the partners (see Romans 7 and Matthew 22:30). This is indicated by the words, "until death do we part." So solemn is the biblical concept of covenant that a faithful covenant-keeper would not break a covenant even if the other party does. (2 Timothy 2:12-13, Hosea 2 and 3, especially 2:14-23). God provides the ultimate example of this in Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36 and 37, and Hosea, cf. Hebrews 8 and 10. Within covenantal marriage, sexual consummation serves as an oath and seal and traditionally, is augmented by the invoking of lawful oaths and vows in accordance with the Westminster Confession of Faith chapters 22 and 24.

Application: 1.) Christian marriages are to be permanent. 2.) Christian marriage is not merely human or civil but is "before and under God." Therefore same-sex marriage is an oxymoron along with other variations upon the biblical parameters defining marriage and the biblical boundaries placed upon sexual expression. 3.) Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships entailing the "one flesh" bond, leaving one's family of origin and cleaving to one's spouse signifying the establishment of a new family unit distinct from the two original families. 4.) There is a deep mutuality implying the self-giving of one human being to another while maintaining the distinct biblically ordained roles for male and female. 5.) Marriage is not only permanent, sacred, intimate, and mutual; it is also exclusive in that no other human relationship must interfere with the marriage commitment between a husband and a wife. This is why our Lord views violations of his seventh commandment so seriously.