

OUR COVENANT GOD: FRIEND, HUSBAND AND FATHER (3)

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God as Our Husband

This section will explore the aspects of the covenant underscored by marriage as a symbol of the covenant. That marriage serves as a picture of the covenant has been recognized from at least the time of the Reformation. For example, Charles Pfeiffer notes in his doctoral thesis on Heinrich Bullinger's conception of marriage that "it can be said that marriage in Bullinger's theology is analogous to the covenant between God and man."² As a symbol of the covenant, marriage underscores different aspects of the covenant of grace. This section will demonstrate that Scripture emphasizes faithfulness, the headship-submission dynamic, intimacy and permanence in marriage. However, before each one of these aspects can be developed, it must be proved from Scripture that God views the church as His spiritual bride.

In the prophecy of Jeremiah, God reveals that by establishing a covenant with His people, He has married Himself to them. For example, after a description of Judah's sin, the Lord commands His people to repent. He then declares through His mouthpiece, Jeremiah, "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; *for I am married unto you*: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion" (Jer. 3:14). Importantly, God Himself establishes the connection between the covenant of grace and marriage. Later in the prophecy of Jeremiah, God promises a new covenant with His people in which He will write His own law on their hearts. While promising a new covenant, God accuses Israel and Judah of breaking the covenant, even though within the covenant God is their husband:

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

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² Charles W. Pfeiffer, *Heinrich Bullinger and Marriage* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1982), p. 90.

Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; *which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD*: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:31-33).

These verses make a definite connection between God's covenant and His marriage to His people. Thus marriage serves as an beautiful earthly symbol of the covenant relationship that God has established with His people.

In addition to Jeremiah, several other Old Testament prophets speak of God as married to His covenant people. For example, Ezekiel 16 contains an extended allegory in which, after a description of His undeserved favour, God betroths Himself to a woman, who represents God's people, by spreading His skirt over her—the Old Testament method for betrothal (Ruth 3:9):

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine (Eze. 16:8).

Once again, God connects His marriage to His people with the establishment of His covenant. That God marries His covenant people comes out in other Old Testament prophecies as well. Isaiah 62 speaks of God rejoicing over His marriage to Israel, even “as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride” (v. 5). The book of Hosea as a whole reveals God as the faithful husband to an unfaithful people, where especially chapters 1-2 highlight this truth.

The New Testament, particularly Ephesians 5, confirms God's marriage to His people in Jesus Christ. This passage speaks of Christ Jesus as the bridegroom of the church:

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the

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church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband (vv. 31-33).

While much could be said about this passage, standing at the foreground is the truth that God's marriage to His people represents the reality of marriage, while earthly marriages are a mere figure of that relationship. Thus, by analyzing the teachings of Scripture concerning marriage, one can discover the important aspects of marriage that derive their source from God's marriage to His people.

Having established that God views His covenant people as His spiritual bride, it is necessary to determine the aspects of the covenant highlighted by the earthly relationship. The main themes of Scripture's teachings on marriage will be applied to the bond between God and His church. Also, as with friendship, the element of love will not be treated independently, since love is central to all three of the symbols of the covenant of grace, including the father-child relationship. However, in addition to love, Scripture emphasizes that marriage requires faithfulness, involves headship and submission, provides intimacy and stands unbreakable.

Marriage Requires Faithfulness

Scripture reveals that marriage requires faithfulness. This point of emphasis on faithfulness comes out in Scripture's condemnation of adultery, for a lack of faithfulness in marriage manifests itself as adultery. The Decalogue explicitly forbids such unfaithfulness in marriage in the seventh commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14). This admonition is repeated throughout the Pentateuch in passages such as Leviticus 18:20, Numbers 5:11-31, and Deuteronomy 22:13-30.

Scripture not only forbids the act of adultery, but also sinful thoughts and desires. Jesus Christ taught this truth over against mere external obedience to the law when He declared,

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart (Matt. 5:27-28).

Drawing from this passage, as well as the whole of Scripture, the *Heidelberg Catechism* emphasizes this need for faithfulness in marriage:

Q. 109. Doth God forbid in this commandment only adultery and such like gross sins?

A. Since both our body and soul are temples of the Holy Ghost, He commands us to preserve them pure and holy; therefore He forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires, and whatever can entice men thereto.

By expressly forbidding adultery, even in the form of lustful thoughts, the Bible clearly teaches that faithfulness is required in marriage. This point stands so prominently on the foreground of Scripture's teachings concerning marriage that no more evidence is necessary to prove it.

Since Scripture requires faithfulness in earthly marriage, faithfulness is required within the covenant of grace. As members of the covenant, God's bride, the church, must be faithful to Him. Therefore, marriage as a symbol of the covenant demands devotion to Jehovah. Just as a married woman may not seek other lovers, neither may the church seek after others for joy and satisfaction. This, however, is the sin that occasioned the messages from the prophets quoted above. God sent prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea to expose the adulterous nature of Israel's and Judah's sins. Their transgression against the law, especially idolatry, was viewed as adultery with other lovers.

While the requirement of faithfulness has implications for the elect members of the covenant, this aspect of marriage also highlights God's faithfulness to His bride, the church.³ Although His people commit spiritual adultery and demonstrate their unfaithfulness, nevertheless, Jehovah remains loyal and steadfast. Indeed, God's lovingkindness to an adulterous people serves to magnify the gracious character of His covenant.

In addition, the need for faithfulness in marriage underscores the essential connection between election and the covenant. Scripture requires husbands to devote themselves to their wives rather than going after other lovers. For example, the Apostle Paul, by divine inspiration, includes "the husband of one

³ The need for obedience, which is an aspect of submission, is emphasized more strongly by the father-child relationship and thus will be more fully treated later.

wife” (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) as a requirement for office-bearers. In the same way that Scripture calls each husband to be a “one woman man,” so too, Jehovah is a “one people God.” In other words, God has betrothed Himself to His elect people, and to them only.

Jesus Christ’s faithfulness as the bridegroom demands that only those whom God has chosen from eternity may be (true) members of the covenant. For God to include reprobate sinners in the covenant would be adultery. However, since Jesus Christ is the perfectly faithful, loyal and steadfast bridegroom, only the elect may be the members of the covenant.

Just as a godly husband refrains from desiring other women, so God refrains from desiring the salvation of those who do not belong to His covenant. Proponents of the well-meant offer of the gospel teach that while God saves only the elect, He also desires the salvation of the reprobate. However, this is inconsistent with the need for faithfulness within the covenant as underscored by the earthly symbol of marriage. Just as a husband sins not only by the physical act of adultery but also by desiring another woman, so it would be a violation of God’s character, as a faithful covenant husband, not only to save a reprobate but even to desire the salvation of a reprobate sinner.

Marriage Involves Headship and Submission

In addition to requiring faithfulness, marriage involves the dynamic of headship and submission between the husband and wife, respectively. Scripture sets forth husbands as heads over their wives, who then are called to submit to their husbands. Indeed, already in the opening chapters of the Bible, we read, “Unto the woman he [i.e., God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; *and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee*” (Gen. 3:16). Scripture repeats this instruction throughout, especially in the Apostle Paul’s epistles. For example, Ephesians 5:22-23 states, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife.” Scripture expresses this truth in Colossians 3:18-19 and I Peter 3:1-7 as well.

Again, since earthly marriage serves as a picture of the covenant, this dynamic of headship and submission applies to God’s marriage to His church. More specifically, the marriage between Christ the bridegroom and His bride

the church serves as the reality of which earthly marriages are only a figure. Scripture expressly teaches in Ephesians 5 that Christ stands as head of the church and that the church must therefore submit to Christ:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, *even as Christ is the head of the church*: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore *as the church is subject unto Christ*, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing (vv. 22-24).

The church has confessed through the ages that Christ is head of the church. Importantly, Christ's headship over the church must be viewed as an aspect of the covenant highlighted by the earthly symbol of marriage.

He who stands as head in the covenantal relationship of marriage must tend to the spiritual needs of his wife. Engelsma takes note of this calling in his book, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church*, when he writes under the heading "Headship as Responsibility," "[The husband] is called to be the head of his wife also with regard to their spiritual life. He bears a responsibility for his wife's spiritual wellbeing. God calls him to bless his wife."⁴ Husbands have this calling because Christ as head of His bride tends to the church's spiritual welfare, namely, He accomplishes her salvation (Eph. 5:23).

Within marriage, wives must submit to their husbands, even as the church submits to Christ. By giving this injunction to wives, Scripture exhorts wives to place themselves under their husbands. This necessarily includes obedience. This holds true because the church must obey her Lord, Jesus Christ. However, while the earthly analogy of marriage demonstrates the need for obedience within the covenant, the earthly analogy of the bond between father and child more fully demonstrates this truth. Thus, in this section, the emphasis will fall on Jesus Christ as Head of the covenant.

Analyzing marriage as an analogy of the covenant of grace indicates the necessity of confessing that Christ is Head of the covenant. Many affirm that Christ acts as Mediator and Surety of the covenant but they deny that Christ stands as Head of the covenant. They grant that Christ stands as Head of the

⁴ David Engelsma, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 1998), p. 49.

elect and of the church, but not of the covenant. However, by recognizing that earthly marriage accurately represents the marriage between Christ and the church, and that husbands stand as heads over their wives, it follows that Christ is Head over His covenant as well. In addition, affirming Christ as Head of the covenant further necessitates the confession that only the elect truly belong to the covenant.

Marriage Provides Intimacy

God instituted marriage, in part, in order that it might provide intimacy. After God created Adam, He caused all the animals to pass by him. By this process, Adam realized that he lacked a companion. Thus God created the woman out of the rib of Adam and gave her to Adam as a wife. Adam recognized, due to the manner in which his wife Eve was created, that, although they were two individuals, nevertheless, they were one flesh:

Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:23-25).

By instituting marriage, God gave to Adam and Eve the gift of sexual intercourse. God Himself commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. In addition, God gave them the gift of sex as a means for intimacy with each other. Importantly, all of this occurred before the fall. Thus one of God's original purposes for marriage was that it might provide a certain closeness between husband and wife within the marriage bond.

The whole of Scripture reaffirms the place of intimacy within marriage. To the Israelites, God commanded newly married men not to go out to war in order that they might "cheer up" their wives (Deut. 24:5). The wisdom literature of the Scriptures also expresses the place of intimacy in marriage:

Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love (Prov. 5:18-19).

Furthermore, nearly the entirety of the Song of Solomon expresses the delight that husband and wife find in each other.

In addition, the New Testament confirms the place of intimacy in marriage. The Apostle Paul treats sex in his letter to the church at Corinth. He instructs married persons about the necessity of intercourse within marriage on the grounds that husband and wife have been united as one flesh:

Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (I Cor. 7:3-5).

In addition, the writer to the Hebrews refers to marriage as “honourable in all, and the bed undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). Thus God’s Word clearly teaches that marriage provides intimacy.

The intimacy within earthly marriages reflects the closeness of the covenant bond between Christ and the church. Again, since marriage serves as a symbol of the covenant, Scripture’s teachings concerning intimacy apply to the covenant bond between God and His people. Specifically, this aspect of marriage underscores the *closeness* of the union that God has established with His covenant people. Engelsma takes note of this, stating, “In the sexual relationship, there is a unique realization and expression of the closeness of marriage. The two are one flesh.”⁵ When husband and wife enter into marriage, they become one flesh. This represents the closest and most intimate earthly relationship possible. So too, when God establishes His covenant with His people, they are drawn into the most intimate relationship of love and communion.

In addition, the element of intimacy within the earthly symbol of marriage serves to describe the character of God’s love within the covenant. As noted earlier, love serves as the unifying principle between these different analogies

⁵ Engelsma, *Marriage*, p. 78.

of the covenant. However, marriage as a symbol underscores the wonder and power of God's love within the covenant. Again, Engelsma's development of this point is helpful:

The love of Christ for us is awesome. It is quite different from the sentimental, ineffectual, easily resisted love of Arminian theology. Christ's love, and God's love in Him, is a relentless, unswerving, demanding, possessive, jealous love, the sovereign love of Reformed theology. It is a love that elects, redeems, regenerates, sanctifies, preserves, and glorifies—all in order that Christ, the bridegroom, may take to Himself the church, His bride, as His everlasting possession.⁶

Thus marriage as a symbol underscores a unique type of closeness and intimacy within the covenant that does not come out in the closeness between friends or between father and child.

Marriage Stands Unbreakable

Scripture teaches not only that marriage requires faithfulness, involves headship and submission, and provides intimacy but also that the marriage bond is unbreakable. Especially Jesus' own testimony concerning marriage reveals this truth. For example, Jesus forbade divorce in His Sermon on the Mount:

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery (Matt. 5:31-32).

Jesus' contempt for divorce comes out more fully in His dialogue with the wicked Pharisees over the matter of divorce that is recorded in Matthew 19. The Pharisees asked Jesus whether a man may lawfully "put away his wife for every cause" (v. 3). To this question, Christ responded by quoting from

⁶ Engelsma, *Marriage*, p. 79.

Genesis 2:24 that, when a woman marries a man, they become “one flesh” (v. 5). He then states, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (v. 6). By this Jesus taught that only death breaks the marriage bond between husband and wife. However, the Pharisees further questioned Jesus and implied that His teachings contradicted the Law of Moses prescribed in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which they took to mean that divorce was lawful. However, Jesus explains that Moses “suffered” the Israelites to divorce “but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:8). Indeed, Malachi 2:14-16 confirms God’s hatred of divorce. Thus Jesus goes on to forbid divorce, except in the case of adultery (Matt. 19:9).

Importantly, Christ not only forbade divorce but He also forbade remarriage while one’s spouse is living. While some argue that the exception clause (“except it be for fornication”) in Matthew 19:9 gives legitimacy to remarriage for the innocent party, Jesus’ instruction on this matter in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 indicates that the exception clause refers only to divorce itself. Importantly, if the exception clause applied to remarriage, then it could be said that unfaithfulness in marriage breaks the marriage bond. However, since adultery only gives occasion for divorce and not remarriage, adultery does not actually break the marriage bond. Therefore, Scripture teaches that the marriage bond is unbreakable.

This has implications for one’s conception of the covenant. By affirming that marriage is unbreakable, one must recognize the unbreakable character of God’s covenant of grace with His elect people. Engelsma closes his book on marriage with this exact point. He writes, “One’s conception and testimony of marriage is necessarily related to one’s conception and testimony of the faithfulness of God in the covenant.”⁷ Engelsma then affirms that the main argument for the unbreakable bond of marriage is the unbreakable bond established by God in the covenant of grace. By doing so, Engelsma argues from the reality to the figure. However, the argument works both ways. Since Scripture teaches that the earthly marriage bond is unbreakable, God’s covenant of grace and the marriage between Christ and the church must also be understood as unbreakable.

⁷ Engelsma, *Marriage*, p. 226.