

Genesis 1:26-28

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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## THE IDEAL COUPLE OR COVENANTAL MARRIAGE

### Transcendence

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone;"

### Hierarchy

"I will make him a helper suitable for him." And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.

### Ethics

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon a man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

### Oath

And the man 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."

### Succession

For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh, And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:18-25).

Here's the scene. Picture a couple madly in love with each other. They sit on a bench at a park just next to a beautiful, gently flowing river. They watch the boats go by. They hear the sounds of the horns of great ships in addition to all of nature's other noises in the background. They peer off toward the water as if the world were just outside of them and they were in another universe peaking in. They are in another world with their love for each other. They look away but their thoughts are still on the other.

It's late in the Fall. A crispness fills the air. They are both slightly bundled. They sit close to each other. They turn and begin to stare. They sit face to face, looking like two lovers in a restaurant with elbows perched on the table and faces propped in hand simply staring at the other. Finally, they lightly kiss and then turn back toward the water, holding hands. Once again, they gaze off into another world.

She tilts her head back in the breeze. Her rich, coarse hair blows only slightly in the gusty air as it is tied back and it barely hangs off the back of the bench. Her eyes tear in the wind and her make-up fades.

He too leans back on the bench. He begins to talk of

their relationship and how much it has meant. He recalls how they met. He talks of their dating. He speaks of the seemingly short time they've been married. He stops and puts his arm around her shoulder. He turns to her and tells her of his love. They kiss again.

### CUT. STOP. STOP. STOP.

I can almost see some of you as I write this. The male readers are choking and coughing, wondering if I've turned *Renewal* into a romance serial. The female readers are thinking, "Oooh,ahhh, this Sutton guy is finally beginning to write something we can understand."

My employer, Gary North, as he reads this might be tempted to say, "Yuk, Arrrgh," and call for his secretary. He might say to her, "Lynnnnnnnnn [That's Lynn Dwelle, I.C.E.'s secretary; Maureen Peters now works with publishing.], call Sutton and tell'm he's fired!"

So before everyone explodes, consider the method in my romantic madness. I'm a teacher, among other things. I began this newsletter as an object lesson to prove a point. And the point has to do with stereotype **ages** of the **ideal couple**.

So let me ask you a question. When I start the story and say, "There's a couple madly in love with each other," how old do you picture them to be? Be honest now. Don't cheat.

Do you picture them to be twenty? Forty? Maybe you were thinking they're really a couple of teenagers the way they're carrying on. Right?

Brace yourself. If you would have pictured them to be, say **seventy**, then you've got the age that was in **my** mind because that's the age of the couple I saw the other day when I was visiting Atlanta. When I noticed them, I was reminded of how our society would never think of using this old couple on a park bench for a metaphor of romantic love. And yet there it was in all of its true romantic loveliness.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the average American considers the ideal couple to be **young**, without children and usually not married. If you don't believe me, then watch the ads on television and in magazines. How old are the couples in those ads? When was the last time you saw a make-up company promote its products with an elderly couple holding hands on a park bench? Never, and as long as Western culture is so decadent, you never will.

Why? We've been conditioned to think that **love** and **age** don't go together. But Scripture shows us several **old** couples as the ideal: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Zipporah, and even Ruth and Boaz; remember, Ruth was mid-

dle-aged anyway before she married Boaz. She had been married for several years before her first husband died. She had then been forced to leave Moab with Naomi, her mother-in-law, and travel to Israel where she met Boaz, her second husband.

**The Biblical ideal of marriage is this: a happily married little old couple sitting on a park bench holding hands, one which has been worn by years of living life together.** How can this ideal marriage be achieved? Moses tells us in the early chapters of Genesis. In this newsletter, I develop the covenantal structure of Adam and Eve's relationship to present five principles of **covenantal marriage**.

### Made in Heaven

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

This verse begins a covenant sequence, providing the first covenantal principle of marriage. It starts with **God** speaking, just like the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 1:3), as well as just about virtually all covenants; consistently, God's announcement is the key for detecting the beginning of some kind of covenant pattern. So, this declaration from God about man's need focuses attention on God's role in marriage, which by the way remains a constant theme throughout this passage.

I call this the "Made in Heaven" principle. God is the origin of marriage. He announces man's need, so He knows of man's deepest longings. He makes man aware of his need through involvement with the animal kingdom. And, beyond knowing the needs and making them known, He provides man with a wife who perfectly meets them. God is the Sovereign cause of this first marriage.

This means all marriages are made in heaven. They are not mere social arrangements created by man. They are established by the invisible God who works so mysteriously in their own formation that people don't often notice the Lord's hand until it is pointed out. I have been able to persuade many a couple of the sovereignty of God by simply asking them to rehearse the sequence of events leading up to their own marriage. I almost always receive an answer reaching near magical proportions as they start to unravel complex tales of their "Divine encounter."

### Marriage: A Divine Encounter

I remember all too well a couple who came for counsel many years ago. Both were almost in tears and so was I. They wanted out of their marriage so badly that it scared me. Over and over again I tried to tell them, "Your marriage was made in heaven." Then I went back to Genesis 2, and read the chapter. I said, "Look, God created marriage, and He created your marriage." They just sat there and stared at me.

I said again, "God made **your** marriage, and you have to forget about trying to tear up what He made." They continued to stare at me, it seemed like hours, and the husband finally said, "He may have made the first marriage, and He may have made other marriages, but He couldn't have made **our** marriage. We hate each other!"

That did it. I was just about ready to give up. How could I impress upon them that God had created their marriage? How could I show them that their marriage was not an **accident**? Then an idea flashed through my mind. I asked them to tell me how they met each other.

She started slowly. She was at the point where she didn't want to talk. But she knew that it was almost all over, so she began, probably figuring, "What have I got to lose anyway." She said, "I didn't think I was going to be accepted."

I said, "Wait a minute, you've already lost me. Accepted for what? I thought you were going to tell me how the two of you met." Perking up a bit, she continued, "I am. I'm coming to that. You see, it begins when I had applied for a teaching position at a college in the Midwest. The position had already been filled, but at the last minute the person's husband was transferred to the corporate office in New York City. She quit, and so, they called me at the last minute.

"While I was on my way to take the position, a bad storm came up and forced me off the road. My car slid sideways into a curb. I got out and discovered that the right front wheel was bent. I had to be towed to the nearest town which was only a couple of miles down the road.

"It so happened that a girl I had known in college lived in this town. Since I was going to be there for at least a day, I gave her a call. She was very friendly and told me to come on over.

"When I arrived she told me, 'you're here just in time, come to a Bible study that I've been attending for the last six months.' Everything was happening too fast for me to say, 'No.' I hadn't been to Church since high school. So I went.

"After we got there, I found out that the regular teacher was sick, and the assistant pastor of my friend's Church was taking his place. That night, after the Bible study, I talked to the assistant minister and became a Christian."

I had to interrupt her at this point because it was getting late. I said, "Karen, I hate to rush you, but even though I am pleased to hear your testimony, I want you to tell me how you and Robert met."

She said, "I just did." Confused, I responded, "What do you mean?" Karen turned toward Robert and clarified, "The assistant pastor was **Robert**."

I don't know if either one noticed how far my jaw dropped, but before I could pull myself back together he spoke up and told her, "I never knew **all** those events led up to our meeting."

They both looked toward me, half expecting me to say something; so I did. I asked them, "Want to figure the odds on all of those details being chance: the ones from the teacher's husband getting transferred to the Bible study teacher's coming down ill at the last minute?"

They didn't answer. They didn't have to. It was written all over their faces. The rehearsal of how they had met had done something to them. They had regained an awareness of the origin of their marriage. Without saying a word, Robert slid his hand over hers and whispered, "God really did bring us together. It would take more faith to believe we met by chance than to believe what Pastor Sutton has been trying to tell us."

This is the first covenantal principle of marriage. Marriage is **made in heaven**. It has a transcendent, sacred character.

### Compulsion to Behold

"I will make him a helper suitable for him." And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.

The second point of the covenant focuses on **division of labor**, what can also be called **representation**; it is technically designated **hierarchy** in the covenantal structure. In the Deuteronomic covenant, Moses is given his classic advice to appoint captains over tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands (Deuteronomy 1:8ff.). The great Exodus leader is specifically **prepared** for the provision of additional labor to aid him in the leading of Israel.

In the second part of the marriage covenant in Genesis

two, this hierarchical theme appears. Adam is **prepared** for a division of labor. He must see that he cannot carry out the cultural mandate (Genesis 1 :28) by himself. He must realize his need for a “helper suitable for him.” He sought this need by his failure to find a “helper suitable for him” when he attempts to name the animals. The command to name the animals is nothing more than a **hierarchical** exercise.

Yet, the specifics of this pedagogical lesson contain a rich principle of marriage. For, marriage is more than simply a utilitarian relationship of two people working together to accomplish a stated end. Yes, it involves this, but I've seen certain Christians, ablaze with the division of labor concept, miss the core idea of hierarchy. I call it **beholding**, not only the basis of division of labor in marriage but a vital element in a romantic relationship.

### Beholding

The Bible text literally says, “I will make helper **turned toward him.**” In other words, the distinctive of his spouse would be that she **beheld him face to face.** This rendering fits what happens in the naming-of-the-animals sequence. I believe Adam could not find an animal that would **look him in the face** because animals shy away from facial contact with humans. If you don't believe me, the next time you go to the zoo, walk up to the cage and try to get an animal to maintain eye contact. You will find that he won't do it. I have a well-trained Springer Spaniel named Hobbit. She is a wonderful dog and all eight of our family dearly love her. But Hobbit will not maintain eye contact with a human, not even me and I trained her. Is she a bad dog? No, she was not made to be turned face to face with a human. Only humans can maintain eye contact with other humans.

Adam discovered this reality as he went out among the animals. As he named them, he noticed that they turned away from him. He could not get them to look him in the eye. As a result, he was prepared for real division of labor, a helper he could **behold**, and one who work at his side **beholding** him.

I believe that more is involved in **beholding** than simply helping Adam shuck the corn. I think Moses is describing an emotional and romantic attachment that should undergird the division of labor in the home. One writer says it this way:

Psychologists have found by controlled experiments that people who are deeply in love with each other do engage in much more eye contact than other couples. As the old song goes, “I only have eyes for you.” This is true of lovers.

Eye contact shows its significance early in life when an infant's eyes begin focusing at about two to four weeks of age. From then on, a baby is always searching for another set of eyes to lock on to, and this becomes a necessity. The child's emotions are fed by eye contact. We never outgrow this need, and when a loved one avoids eye contact with us because of disinterest or anger, it can be **devastating**.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Wheat's comments are easily confirmed if you'll take note of a newly married couple at “a restaurant. They'll be easy to detect. They will be sitting face to face with each other, and with about two inches of space between them. And then, if that couple gets into a quarrel, you will notice that one or the other will turn away to the side, maybe even completely turning their backs toward each other. This is **beholding**. It is the heart of a hierarchical relationship. Without it, the headship/submission role of hus-

band/wife loses vital dynamic and becomes simply utilitarian, something that I believe is less than God's expectations for marriage.

### Surrender

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

The third section of the Biblical covenant normally outlines the stipulations of a covenant relationship. For example, the Deuteronomic covenant expands the Ten Commandments as an ethical basis of the covenant (Deuteronomy 5-26). The general principle, however, should not be lost in the details of the commandments. It is this: total surrender is the true basis of the vassal's relationship to the Suzerain. And, should the vassal fail to maintain this complete surrender, then the commandments will not be obeyed. It is this **surrender** concept that I'm afraid often gets lost in a discussion of obedience.

In the third segment of the marital covenant of Genesis, this ethical theme of **surrender** is noticeable. First, “deep sleep” is an image of **surrender**. This scene can be viewed one of two ways. Perhaps the language of the text means God forced Adam to fall down into deep sleep. Or, perhaps the text indicates that Adam willfully laid down and allowed God to send him into a “deep sleep” suitable for operation. In either case, engaging in “deep sleep” is a symbol of surrender.

Moreover, “deep sleep” symbolizes surrender to death. This surrender-to-death appears in the negative and positive in Scripture. Jonah fell into the same kind of sleep in the bottom of a ship, when he was in rebellion to God. A storm was raging on the outside and he would not wake up. He was theologically dead. This same theme appears when Christ falls asleep in a ship. Again, a storm begins to rage and the disciples become frightened. Jesus is awakened from His sleep, calms the sea and delivers the disciples. The theology: the Bible wants us to see that Jesus was symbolically dead and raised from death; He then calmed the stormy sea, a symbol itself of the nations of the world. In short, the scene provided a vivid picture of the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ, if only the disciples had had eyes to see.

Thus, Adam was surrendering to God's surgery for the provision of a mate. Whether the Bible text implies that God forced Adam to surrender, or it suggests that Adam submitted himself, this is the ultimate in **obedience**.

Second however, the surrender theme is also indicated by the complete process of Eve's formation. Being made from a “rib” required total surrender to each other because both were vulnerable should their total allegiance be broken. Adam became vulnerable in that one spot where the rib was missing, and Eve became the living source of his protection. Without her, he could be pierced in the side and his vital organs, namely the heart, could be reached. The result would be fatal.

She, on the other hand, was made from man. She became part of the armor that protected his vitals. She could be his greatest source of strength, filling the empty space in his life. Or, she could become his greatest source of weakness, becoming the means by which he could be destroyed.

Indeed, these themes surface in the Bible. The groom is constantly attacked from the side, graphically illustrated in an ultimate sense when Christ is pierced in the side because His bride, Israel, betrayed Him. And, the woman is also constantly the door to man's downfall, immediately demonstrated in the temptation of Eve by Satan.

1. Ed Wheat, (Grand Rapids' Zondervan, [1980] 1987), p.92.

In the husband/wife relationship, the man must surrender by dying to himself. He should allow his wife to be his greatest source of strength, which means of course that she can become his greatest liability. Why? To surrender to his wife he should let her fill the empty space in his life, visually symbolized by the absent rib. To let her in, he must reveal his deepest longings and darkest desires. In so doing, he becomes **vulnerable**, as does anyone who confides in another.

**She** in turn can use his vulnerability in one of two ways. She should surrender to him all that she has to fill the voids in his life. This may not be easy, especially when she has discovered his weaknesses. But this is the power and difficulty of surrender. If she surrenders to him, she can complete him. On the other hand, she can use his weaknesses as a bludgeon against him, hammering him into the ground. She can constantly one-up him to the point where he is paralyzed.

This is the heart of **surrender**, the third point of the **marital** covenant. It is also the key to **obedience**, the third point of **Biblical** covenant. Obedience without surrender is pharisaism. Surrender without obedience is hypocrisy!

### The Vow

And the man 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."

The fourth part of the Biblical covenant usually involves **ratification** themes. In the Deuteronomic covenant, Israel ratifies their covenant at Ebal and Gerizim (Deuteronomy 27-28). This is nothing less than a series of vows in the form of oaths before God.

In the marital covenant of Genesis, Adam makes a solemn oath in the form of a vow. He says, "**This** is now." Notice that he does not say "You are now." Why? Adam addresses **God**, declaring his oath and vow to **Him**. This was not simply a social contract arranged between only two parties. This was a sacred covenant made among **three** parties: God, Adam and Eve.

This makes the vow critical to the success of a marriage. How so? First, vows declare the **priority** of the other person in one's life. "As the vows taken at baptism acknowledge the Lord Jesus to hold the position of absolute preeminence in a person's life, so the vows of marriage establish each partner in a human relationship which takes unquestionable priority over all other ties. The vows make it possible for any ordinary person to begin to become as fully and overwhelmingly important in the life of just one other human being as each one of us is, mysteriously, in the life of God."<sup>2</sup> You might say that our vows are a holy reminder of how important a role our spouse is to play in our lives.

Second, the vow informs us that the Lord alone is the basis of marriage. It gently focuses away from an overly passionate dependence and aims our love in a permanent direction. Perhaps the wedding ceremony itself is the greatest reminder of the force of the vow.

Mike Mason,  
Press, 1985), p. 102.

(Portland, Oregon: Multnomah

The vows of marriage, **therefore**, hedge the relationship in. In one sense, the vows are impossible to keep, but they are also impossible to walk away from without severe consequences. Why? Because these vows are taken before and specifically to **God** and not just to man.

### Oneness

For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:18-25).

The final segment of the Biblical covenant speaks of continuity and succession. Normally, this is established through union between the people and the covenant head. For example, before Moses' death, he calls Joshua as a covenant representative to reaffirm his allegiance to the Mosaic law. As this is done through a sacred rite of bequeathing covenantal inheritance, Joshua becomes the successor of Moses. Covenantal continuity is sustained.

In the marital covenant, a process of succession from parents to a new covenantal union is described, actually commanded. A new union is formed that maintains succession. The act is twofold.

First, there must be **detachment**. Each must "cleave father and mother." This detachment should also, I hasten to add, be complete. It should be emotional severance. The spouse should not be dependent on the parents for moral support. This is not the same as saying the parents can not give emotional encouragement. But the spouse should not be **dependent** on it.

It should be **personal** separation. I choose this word to describe dependence on the parents for counsel. Again, this does not mean the couple cannot go to their parents for counsel periodically. The issue is dependence to the point of forming a parent/child dependence.

Finally, it should be **financial** separation. The new couple should become financially independent. This does not mean they can't use seed money, dowries and inheritance. But they should use the starting capital of the parent/child relationship to form a truly independent husband/wife union. This brings us to the other side of oneness.

Second, there should be **union** or "cleaving." This "cleaving" is the total dependence on one's spouse that was involved in the dependence on one's parent. It is symbolized, however, by an act that was not allowed to be performed with the parent, sexual union. This physical union is supposed to be unique to the husband/wife relationship precisely because it represents their unique relationship that not only fulfills all that the parent/child bond provided, but, that goes beyond to new dimensions of human union. This union is a **new** covenant with certain continuity but also dynamic discontinuity.

### Conclusion

These covenantal principles form the basis of Biblical marriage. They are distinctly covenantal because the covenantal Trinitarian God made marriage to image His relationship to His covenant people. Take these principles away and violence is not only done to marriage but to God. With them, an ideal couple is formed, picturing the ideal unions of all unions, covenant with Christ!