



a study on God, marriage, and family

MARRIAGE: SACRAMENT, CONTRACT, OR COVENANT?

I. MARRIAGE AS A SACRAMENT

- Sacrament defined
 - According to the Catholic church, "Efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us."
- Three problems with a sacramental view of marriage
 - 1) "There is nothing in the institution of marriage that 'mystically' dispenses divine grace." (82)
 - 2) Marriage is a vehicle for creating new physical life, not a mechanism for attaining spiritual life. (82)
 - 3) The husband-wife relationship is subjected to the control of the church. (83)

II. MARRIAGE AS A CONTRACT

- "The contractual model constitutes the prevailing secular view of marriage in Western culture." (83)
- This approach views marriage "as a bilateral contract that is voluntarily formed, maintained, and dissolved by two individuals." (83)
- This approach "does not...seek to invoke Scripture as its source or grounds of authority." (83)
- The contractual approach "roots marriage in civil law." (84)
- Five general characteristics of contracts:
 - 1) They are typically made for a limited period of time.
 - 2) They most often deal with specific actions.
 - 3) They are conditional upon the continued performance of contractual obligations by the other partner.
 - 4) They are entered into for one's own benefit.
 - 5) They are sometimes unspoken and implicit.
- Limitations of the contractual model of marriage
 - 1) It is not "found anywhere within the pages of Scripture to describe marriage as a whole." (84)
 - "The contractual model did not exist as a developed model of marriage until the seventeenth century at the earliest." (84)
 - 2) It "provides an extremely weak basis for the permanence of marriage." (84)
 - "The contractual model of marriage bases the security and stability of marriage on the ability of people not to sin." (84)

- 3) "By rooting matrimony in civil law, it opens the door to a variety of marital arrangements that Scripture clearly prohibits." (84-85)
 - Some examples include:
 - 1) Same sex marriage
 - 2) Polygamy
 - 3) Incestuous marriage
 - 4) Bestiality

III. MARRIAGE AS A COVENANT

- "The term *covenant* in general conveys the idea of solemn commitment, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenanting parties." (86)
- This view is therefore defined as "a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before God, normally consummated by sexual intercourse." (85)
- Thus, marriage is "not merely a bilateral contract between two individuals," but is "a sacred bond between husband and wife and between the couple and God." (85)
- "The covenantal view roots marriage in the standard of divine law." (86)
- The Bible explicitly refers to marriage as a covenant:
 - Proverbs 2:16-17 – "So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God."
 - Malachi 2:14 – But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.
- The Bible uses covenantal language to describe marriage:
 - *Genesis chapter 2 especially; see endnote 26 on pg. 366 for an extensive list of passages/books that speak covenantally about marriage.*

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF A COVENANT VIEW OF MARRIAGE

- "Embracing the marriage covenant concept means a couple must understand and commit itself to at least the following five things"
 - 1) The permanence of marriage – "Divorce is not permitted except in biblically prescribed circumstances." (89)
 - 2) The sacredness of marriage – Marriage is "a relationship before and under God," (89) although not a mystical union through which grace is dispensed.
 - 3) The intimacy of marriage – "Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships, uniting a man and a woman in a *one flesh* bond." (90)
 - 4) The mutuality of marriage – "Marriage partners are to be first and foremost concerned about the well-being of the other person..." (90)
 - 5) The exclusiveness of marriage – This means that no other human relationship must interfere with the marriage commitment between husband & wife

ⁱ Taken from Gary Chapman's *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003)