



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Who Needs a Covenant?
(*Marriage*, pp. 11-18)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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Who Needs a Covenant?

Our quest for true and unforced love, ironically, has led only to weaker marriages. A covenant takes faithless people and coerces them to keep faith. The problem is not that a binding marital covenant is a tyranny, but that nonbinding marital contracts undercut the very nature of marriage itself.

Prayer

God of unfailing love, teach us to be people of commitment and compassion, who give ourselves sacrificially to each other in covenant love. Show us that true freedom comes in giving ourselves and our power away. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Malachi 2:13-16

Reflection

"Covenants are God's way of organizing, sustaining, and reclaiming relationships established in creation but damaged by sin," notes David Gushee. God initiates them to restore community with and among faithless people by spelling out responsibilities for all parties, eliciting binding promises from them, and marking their commitments with a sign or symbolic action. "But are covenants really necessary?" we may ask, "Can't we all just love one another?" Well, that's the rub, isn't it? Our love for one another and God comes and goes, our feelings change, but thankfully a covenant binds us together anyway – because we need the relationship. Covenants do not replace love, but they allow it to grow and flourish. "For the sake of our love," as Margaret Farley says, "we almost always commit ourselves to certain frameworks for living out our love. The frameworks, then, take their whole meaning...from the love they are meant to serve."

A few biblical passages, like Malachi 2:13-16, apply the concept of covenant directly to human marriage. We have been created by God with needs for "companionship, sex, shared labor, and family partnership," says Gushee, but given our propensity for sin, we are unlikely to form the stable relationships that can satisfy these needs unless we are bound to one another by lasting promises. The marriage covenant provides the structure that can bind a husband and wife together, in spite of their changing whims and desires, for their common good.

Gushee explores seven ways that the marriage relationship is like other covenant bonds in Scripture:

- ▶ *Marriage is a freely entered agreement between two people.* Unlike most marriages today, a marriage in biblical times was an agreement between families and was not initiated just by the individuals. Nevertheless, "at its heart marriage is an agreement between two people to join their lives together."
- ▶ *Marriage publicly ratifies a relationship between a man and a woman.* It does not establish the relationship, but makes it subject "to objective standards and social responsibilities."
- ▶ *Marriage spells out the mutual responsibilities and moral commitments in this new form of community.* In marriage God intends for us to seek the goals of "companionship, sexual expression, procreation,



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and family partnership. The central rules embedded in marriage's sacred promises are sexual exclusivity and permanence." Marriages prosper through "mutual commitment reaffirmed by faithful conduct over time."

- ▶ *Marriage is sealed by oath-signs that publicly symbolize and "perform" the solemn commitments being made.* "The exchanged vows and rings, the promises publicly made, and consummation through sexual intercourse remain the central acts that bring the marital relationship into existence."
- ▶ *Marriage is a lifetime commitment, which can only be broken on biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.*[†]
- ▶ *God is the witness and guarantor of the marriage promises.* This is true, Gushee says, even when a couple does not explicitly embrace God's role. "God is...the One who empowers any couple that manages to keep those vows for a lifetime."
- ▶ *There are dire consequences for breaking the marriage covenant's terms and great rewards for keeping them.* "The blessings and curses of marital success and failure are visible all around us," writes Gushee. "They are built into marriage and do not require an intervening act of divine judgment."

To enter a binding covenant with one's spouse may seem unattractive today, for it is "terribly unromantic about marital love" and reminds us that we are "faithless sinners," Gushee admits. "Yet covenant is not all vinegar and sandpaper.... If I am involved in a trustworthy covenantal marital bond with another, I can relax enough to both give and receive love. I can try and fail and try again to develop communication and sexual skills. Our mutual confidence in the permanence and exclusivity of our bond allows us to give ourselves away, and only as we give ourselves away can we maximize our progress toward human intimacy as God intended it."

Study Questions

1. God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:1-11) is the first one in Scripture. How does it illustrate the basic elements of the biblical concept of covenant?
2. What are the important differences, according to Gushee, between a contract and a covenant? Why does marriage need a covenantal structure?
3. Of the seven aspects of the marriage covenant presented by Gushee, which aspect(s) might seem especially onerous to people in our culture? Why?
4. What is the value of a marriage covenant? How does each of the seven aspects help achieve or protect that value?
5. While David Gushee sees the covenantal structure of marriage as God's response to human faithlessness, from another perspective Terry York interprets it as a completion of God's creative activity. How does he express this theme in his new hymn, "Two Are Called to Live as One"?

Departing Hymn: "Two Are Called to Live As One"

[†] For David Instone-Brewer's interpretation of the biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage, please see the companion article and study guide, "What God Has Joined Together."

Who Needs a Covenant?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical concept of covenant as God's response to human faithlessness.
2. To appreciate the value of the covenantal structure of marriage.
3. To discuss possible sources of resistance in our culture to the marriage covenant.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"A lifelong fire in Robertson McQuilkin's bones blazed into reality as he was inaugurated as president of Columbia Bible College, now Columbia International University. Before long he led the school to become one of the greatest missionary training schools in America. But Alzheimer's disease spun its wicked web, snatching the personality and vibrancy of his wife's mind and body. McQuilkin submitted his resignation in order to care for her. His friends strongly objected and implored him to reconsider his decision to take on the unseemly daily tasks required to care for her. Yet his decision remained firm. In a last ditch effort, Tony Campolo brazenly pleaded with him saying, 'You are reneging on a promise to God!' McQuilkin replied, 'There's a promise that is higher [than the one to lead the school]. And that's the promise I made when I married, the promise to be there for her in sickness and in health.' 'She doesn't even know who you are!' Campolo protested. 'But I know who she is,' he countered, tenderly" (Ginny Bridges Ireland tells this story in *Marriage*, p. 68). How can our marriage promises become more than purely voluntary contracts? What transforms them into lifetime commitments?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Malachi 2:13-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The biblical concept of covenant can illuminate the nature of marriage, David Gushee suggests. He reminds us that marriage, like other human relationships that depend on faithfulness and are all too easily damaged by sin, requires the protection of a covenantal structure (rather than a nonbinding contract or agreement).

Gushee distinguishes between two dimensions of marriage: (1) its purpose, which is to satisfy the "[creation-based] needs of human beings for companionship, sex, and love," and (2) its covenantal structure that enables fickle and faithless human beings to achieve the creational purpose in marriage. In other words, the covenant is not the goal or point of marriage, but is a structure we must embrace if we are to accomplish the goal of marriage. Thus, "there can be no successful marriage that is not both creation-fulfilling and covenantal."

Since only a few biblical passages, like Malachi 2:13-16, apply the covenant concept to marriage, Gushee draws comparisons between marriage and other explicit covenants in Scripture.

Study Questions

1. Gushee identifies eight key elements in biblical covenants. (1) Someone, usually the stronger party, initiates the covenant. (2) It establishes or restores community between the parties. (3) It lists the mutual responsibilities of all the parties, including the goals of their relationship and the rules that apply to them. (4) It involves freely given promises and (5) it is marked publicly by signs or symbolic actions. (6) It is binding on all parties. (7) God witnesses and guarantees the covenant. (8) God promises blessings to those who keep the covenant and enforces penalties on those who break it.
2. Gushee highlights three differences. “[1] While contracts emphasize the precise obligations each party is taking on, covenants place more focus on the relationships that are being established or ratified. Contracts specify an exchange of money or services and terminate when the transaction is complete, while covenants establish a relationship that transcends any particular exchange of goods. [2] Contracts always contain “escape” clauses to enable people to back away from what they judge to have been unwise commitments or failed agreements, while covenants promise open-ended and permanent fidelity to the promises being undertaken and the relationship being established. [3] Finally, contracts are purely and simply human transactions, while covenants invoke the presence of God as guarantor and trustee—even when the covenant is undertaken at the human-to-human level.”
3. To the extent that we are radical individualists, where all of our important relationships are entered freely and may be dissolved when any party wants to leave, the last three aspects will seem onerous. To the extent we are relativists, who believe that we create our own values and rules, the second and third aspects will seem onerous. To the extent that we think our relationships are nobody else’s business, the aspect of public “oath-signs” will seem unnecessary and God’s involvement (the sixth aspect) will seem intrusive.
4. A marital covenant protects us from our own faithlessness. “It takes faithless people and coerces them to keep faith,” Gushee says. This moral coercion is a good thing when it keeps partners together despite their ordinary frustrations and boredom and changing whims. Put another way, a covenant provides a “safe context for the pursuit of the creational needs that are met in marriage.... If I am involved in a trustworthy covenantal marital bond with another, I can relax enough to both give and receive love. I can try and fail and try again to develop communication and sexual skills. Our mutual confidence in the permanence and exclusivity of our bond allows us to give ourselves away, and only as we give ourselves away can we maximize our progress toward human intimacy as God intended it.”

Encourage members to discuss how each aspect of the marriage covenant helps us to keep faith with our spouses.
5. In the first two verses, York suggests that God calls the husband and wife into a covenant relationship that is more than their own desires and wishes, but is a third reality. Through their marriage, which is characterized by an allusion to the Adam and Eve creation story, God continues to accomplish his creative purposes of “weaving lives, and love, and will.” The final verse calls on the marriage partners to “covenant with spouse and God”; in this way, they will “embrace, rehearse, and prove God’s plan.” Are York and Gushee’s views incompatible, or are they two perspectives on the same reality? Gushee says that God uses covenantal structures only after sin has distorted the creation. York stresses that the marriage covenant allows us to cooperate with God to pursue God’s good purposes in creation.

Departing Hymn

“Two Are Called to Live As One” is on pp. 53-55 of *Marriage*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.