

Marriage: Patriarchal, Sacramental, or Covenantal?

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Many modern Western marriage rituals—from engagement, to the wedding ceremony, to post-union practices such as female surname change—are clearly patriarchal. Various customs, including engagement rings that act as modern dowries, separate wedding vows where the woman “loves, honors, and obeys” and the man “loves, honors, and cherishes,” and unequal childrearing, create a system that oppresses women and subordinates them both within and outside of the home. The Christian ritual of marriage, however, redeems patriarchal marriage through emphasis on sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church¹ and on covenant in Protestant denominations.²

In Catholicism, a union is a grace that symbolizes the mystery of Christ’s love for the church. In Protestantism, a couple is united in a formative union that aids one on the path to sanctification. In recent years, the covenant marriage has become a legally binding, recognized form of Christian marriage.³ Since both the sacramental and the covenantal marriage are predicated on God instead of the human couple, cultural—and hence non-theistic—patriarchal mores need not determine pre- and post-marriage rituals.

This article will first overview six categories of marriages in America and then focus on patriarchal, sacramental, and covenantal marriage.⁴ I will highlight aspects of patriarchal marriage present in most American unions, explain the Catholic view on the sacrament of matrimony, and then proceed to an egalitarian presentation of the covenant of marriage for evangelicals.⁵ Based on covenantal theology and scriptures such as Eph 5:25–28, 31–32 and Mal 2:11–16, I will emphasize God as the progenitor, sustainer, and redeemer of Christian marriage and eschew patriarchal forms of marriage as incompatible within biblical egalitarian theology. I turn first to an overview of marriage.

Types of Unions and Marriages

A 2007 survey found that three quarters of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is the “mutual happiness and fulfillment” of adults.⁶ While children remain an objective of most marriages—eighty percent of all white women in the United States will have a child—procreation is ancillary to marriage, and marriage is separate from procreation. Christian theology has long acknowledged that children are not necessary for marriage—citing the numerous infertile couples throughout scripture and lauding the companionate aspects of marriage.⁷ Yet Christians have never endorsed a theology that supports having children without being married,⁸ even though generating a child outside of wedlock is no longer socially stigmatized. Indeed, by 2013, 40.6 percent of all children in the United States were born to unmarried women.⁹ Of course, some of these women are in committed relationships. Others chose single motherhood over abortion, while some were abandoned by their partners. Christians must not judge the morality of these trends

outside of the context, nor demand explanations from women, but must rather commit to loving women and children in our midst regardless of marital state or paternity. Leaving the role of procreation within marriage aside, my objective here is to explore the most common permutations of domestic unions in the United States.

In America, there are at least six different models of marriage. First, there is a common-law marriage, defined by a long-term relationship of cohabitation. It is socially recognized, and in some cases, legally recognized. The timeline to establish these unions varies by district. Common-law marriages can be contracted in nine states (Alabama, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Utah) and the District of Columbia.

A second alternative is a civil union. This is a legally recognized union of a same-sex or opposite-sex couple, with legal rights similar to those of marriage. The term “civil” denotes a secular, non-religious component, consonant with separation of church and state. The term “union” is in contradistinction to “marriage.”

A similar and third type of partnership is a civil marriage. A civil marriage is performed, recorded, and recognized by a government official. Again, note the use of the terms. This is a non-religiously recognized union that is an option for both same- and opposite-sex couples. In the United States, same-sex civil marriage has been legal nationwide since June 26, 2015, when the US Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. This case declared that state-level bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional.¹⁰

A fourth union can be described simply as “marriage,” which encompasses both religious and non-religious unions. Marriage is the formal union of adults, recognized by law and sometimes by faith communities. Religious ceremonies—whether Hindu, Wiccan, Jewish, Christian, etc.—have additional liturgical and theological components. They have legal protection and recognition and indicate a cosmological commitment beyond secular partnership.

A fifth type of marriage is a sacramental marriage. This is a union confected in the Catholic Church where at least one person is a baptized Catholic. There is a requirement that the partners vow to raise any children that they may have in the Catholic faith. The sacrament of marriage from a Catholic perspective will be articulated later in this article.

The sixth and final model of marriage is covenantal. There are two types of covenantal marriage—theological and legal. First, the theological covenant marriage indicates a relationship of a religious nature, where two Christians are united in marriage under God. I believe all marriages between two Christians are covenantal, even if they are not described in that manner. Second, in contradistinction, a legally recognized covenant marriage is a union in Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana, defined by additional juridical structures to make divorce more

difficult. Legal covenant marriages do not require a Christian affiliation; it is state-recognized union, not issued by a church. Of course, it is appealing mainly to Christians who use the theological language of “covenant” to describe their marriages. The numbers of recorded covenant marriages were less than two percent in Louisiana and about 0.25 percent in Arizona and Arkansas in the early 2000s.¹¹ It is unclear how many same-sex couples have sought a legal covenant marriage since *Obergefell v. Hodges*, and I will maintain my focus on opposite-sex marriage. Having thus surveyed the six most common classifications of unions in the United States, the task of my next section is to underscore patriarchal aspects of modern, secular marriage in the United States.

Patriarchal Marriage

Patriarchal marriage is neither a legal nor a religious type of union; rather it is a complex and interlocking social, domestic, positional, sexual narrative that can be applied in any of these unions. I contend it is a narrative not befitting a (theologically) covenantal union. Patriarchal marriage is, furthermore, highly inflected in form and constitutive of many partnerships across culture, era, and geography. Sadly, many Christian unions are not immune from patriarchal presuppositions, much to the disservice of the faith.

Patriarchy is a social system in which males primarily hold power, dominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. In the domain of the family, fathers or father figures wield authority over women and children—male and female. Theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes the compounded layering of male power as “kyriarchy” from the Greek *kyrios*, “lord.” Kyriarchy is thus “a socio-political and cultural-religious system of domination that structures the identity slots open to members of society in terms of race, gender, nation, age, economy, and sexuality and configures them in terms of pyramidal relations of domination and submission.”¹²

Kyriarchy requires a monograph-length treatise to fully understand all of the subtleties and nuances. For the purposes of this essay, kyriarchy encompasses patriarchy and is further buttressed by 1) *Sexism*, defined as prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of natal sex, 2) *Chauvinism*, patronizing, disparaging, or other denigration of women under the belief that they are inferior to males, and 3) *Misogyny*, the hatred or dislike of women or girls. Misogyny can manifest in numerous ways, including workplace discrimination, belittling of “women’s” activities, attitudes and bodies, violence against women, sexual objectification of women and sexual assault.

Patriarchy thrives on dualism, which, in the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “assigns predetermined personality traits to men and women on the basis of their roles in reproduction; and thus extrapolates distinct social roles that must necessarily

follow.”¹³ When these dichotomous gender roles are applied to patriarchal marriage, women are perceived as being *naturally* (as opposed to socially) nurturing, passive, private, at-home companions to men who are erroneously viewed as *naturally* providing, active, public, and sole income earners. Scripture

exalts warriors such as Deborah, Jael, the deuterocanonical Judith, David, and Joshua, and highlights nurturing individuals like Paul, Barnabas, Martha, and Peter’s mother-in-law. Leaders of both sexes also display all of the spiritual gifts throughout scripture.

In sum, an egalitarian interpretation

of scripture proposes that biological sex does not determine social roles, vocation, or personality. However, cultural norms in tandem with biological realities, customs, and social strongholds—inclusive of patriarchy and kyriarchy—determine the parameters of activities, which sometimes become engrained as “the way things are.” I contend that the modern American, secular marriage—and the steps leading up to it—is rife with a-theistic patriarchal imagery, language, and ritual.

In modern America, certain widely accepted events typify the engagement and the wedding ceremony. Taken in the aggregate, social theologians may call this the “marriage script,” or unquestioned *modus operandi* many people unreflectively conform to without checking it against God’s design for equality, mutuality, and self-giving love. Based off of long-entrenched patriarchal understandings of marriage, the modern secular marriage—to which Christians often assent—unfolds as follows.

Patriarchal marriage stretches back to the engagement, and courting and dating prior to that. I will begin at the engagement, since it signifies a commitment to eventual marriage. Engagements are typically prolonged periods where the couple displays an additional social obligation to each other. Historically, this ritual likely harkens back to the betrothal, a period between marital promise and marriage itself needed to confirm that the woman was not pregnant and therefore suitable for marriage.¹⁴

There are several well-known features of a traditional engagement. Although less common now, in previous years a man would ask the father of the woman he was dating for permission to marry her. This petition is illustrative of headship, where the woman is under the authority of her father until she becomes the property of her husband—indicated by the eventual change of last name. If it is not the case that asking for the hand in marriage is representative of headship, then we might ask why women do not ask the father (or mother!) of the man they are courting for permission to propose marriage to him. As it stands, the male is essentially asking for a trade of ownership. Once the father agrees to these terms and conditions, the man proposes marriage to the woman, and at that time she is presented with a ring—usually with a diamond—to be worn, in many cases, for the rest of her life or even beyond.

The engagement ring, which the man does not wear, symbolizes that the woman is no longer under the absolute

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authority of her father, as she was when her bare finger made her “available” to other interested males. The very fact that women are identifiable as “taken” by the engagement ring and men are not speaks to the double standard of women-as-men’s property versus men-as-autocrats. Once beringed, the woman is clearly marked as belonging to another man. If engagement rings are only beautiful symbols of commitment and love to come, then men should wear them too (and indeed, men do in some European countries, such as Sweden). However, the American norm that only women wear the engagement ring, in tandem with the conspicuous expense of the jewelry, indicate no less than a down payment on the eventual exchange of financial support for sex and domestic service. The man is purchasing the woman physically through this initial financial “gift.”

Since mid-nineteenth-century America, the suggested cost of the engagement ring has been set at two months’ salary. This correlation between income and jewelry allows an engaged woman to silently boast of the economic prowess of her soon-to-be husband, and the assurance that she will shortly be financially dependent on her husband, just as she was on her father. Economic dependence of wives is a modern, upper- and middle-class luxury. In poor and working families, all members of the household—including the wife—have to work full-time in order to furnish the needs of a household. The financial exchange of the woman terminates at the wedding, which the parents of the bride traditionally finance. At that time, the man can and will claim access, sexual and otherwise, to the woman he has bought.

The wedding—when funded by the woman’s parents—is an economic investment symbolically equivalent to the dowry. In both cases, the motivation is to offset the expense that marrying a woman incurs since she will not be an economic producer under prescribed gender roles (although her unpaid domestic labor will ensure a functioning home). Furthermore, the family who marries off their son is losing the potential for pecuniary support from a working family member. It is interesting to note that as the average age of marriage gets older, and couples are more egalitarian, the couple themselves fund the wedding, consonant with financial expectations that both partners are economic earners and spenders. This indicates a shift in understanding about “natural” gender roles, as economic necessity often requires both in the couple to work.

At the wedding ceremony, further evidence of patriarchy abounds.¹⁵ In traditional American weddings the groom stands at the altar, wearing a black tuxedo or dark suit. In contrast, the bride wears a white wedding dress, historically indicative of her virginity. The virginity of the man is irrelevant, since there are double standards about the sexuality of young women and young men. If the sexual “purity” of the man were a communal or theological value, and if Christians believe that “true love waits”¹⁶—for both women and men—then the groom would also wear white. But the trope of a male virgin is comical, while the “deflowered” young lady is a serious social breach; thus gendered social standards persist through wedding garb.

As the groom is standing at the altar, the bride is escorted down the aisle by her father. The minister inquires, “Who is

giving this woman to be married to this man?” The father answers “I do” or “her mother and I do.” The bride’s hand is brought from her father’s to her future husband’s. Clearly the transfer of dominion, which was first instigated upon privately petitioning the father for the daughter’s hand in marriage, is re-enacted, this time in public.

The woman goes directly from father to husband. Further, the mother-of-the-bride does not participate in the ceremony, since her “guardian”—her husband—speaks in her stead. The mother does not “give” her daughter away since she is merely a woman too, with no voice or choice of her own, having abdicated her will and autonomy to her husband, just as her daughter is destined to replicate one day with her daughter. With the transfer from father to husband complete, the couple declares their wedding vows.

In years past, the woman has taken separate vows, “to love, honor and *obey*,” while the man agrees to “love, honor and *cherish*.” Obedience is not indicative of mutuality, but rather servitude. Subsequently, banded rings are exchanged and the man is given permission to, “kiss your bride,” or “the bride”—rather than a mutual kiss, or permission for the wife to kiss her husband, thus replicating the erroneous active/passive dichotomy in sexual pursuit. Indeed, at this moment the husband has legitimate and legal access to the wife, while she is expected to submit to him physically.

For a very long time the concept of marital rape did not exist. It was understood that, once married, a man could have intercourse with his wife whenever he wanted, regardless of her feelings, physical condition, consent, or pleasure. Marriage was seen as *carte blanche* consent to sex since women were the property of men. In 1982, Diana E. H. Russell published *Rape in Marriage*, the first book on the topic.¹⁷ By the 1990s, marital rape had become a crime in all fifty states, a full seventy years after the Soviet Union criminalized marital rape, sixty years after Poland, and forty years after Czechoslovakia did the same.¹⁸ Ignoring marital rape on the grounds that the woman belongs to the man is an obvious symptom of the patriarchal marital system that still lingers today in the United States.

Following the male-to-female kiss, the couple is typically pronounced “man and wife” instead of “man and woman” or “husband and wife,” which would indicate mutuality. The man’s identity remains the same, whereas the woman’s identity has been incorporated into the identity of another: someone’s wife. This loss of self is further confirmed by the next words the minister says, “I present to you Mr. and Mrs. (man’s last name).”

Significant academic attention has been given to prefixes for men and women, observing that a man’s title is “Mr.” regardless of his marital status, whereas female prefixes are divided by marital status—“Miss” for the unmarried and “Mrs.” for the married. Many other languages have similar linguistic structures to adjudicate the marital status—and hence the subjection—of women in relation to men, whereas the man is his own person. Aware of this toxic practice, the United States adopted “Ms.” as the recognized equivalent to “Mr.” by the 1970s.¹⁹ It is now a common salutation for women in certain

settings, but patriarchal systems require a woman's marital status to be clearly and immediately identifiable by prefix. Further, there is the matter of the surname in the presentation of the couple.

Names indicate ownership, which is why people put them on books, suitcases, and business cards. Re-naming was a powerful indicator of character in the OT and has often been a common occurrence in slavery. It is right that a married couple would form a new identity together, but if the change of the last name is only representative of the beginning of a one-flesh identity, then Christians might question why men do not change or hyphenate their last names—with at least the same frequency, if not more—than women after marriage, as did a certain Barzillai in Ezra 2:61.²⁰

To be sure, Christians who read Gen 2:24 might expect that it is *always* the man who would change his last name since “a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife.” But this is not the case, and American men almost never modify their last names upon marriage. Indeed, the very suggestion that men should change their last names after marriage seems absurd, supererogatory, or inconvenient. This social sentiment is highlighted by US attitudes towards the normalcy of name changing for women.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and implementation of the so-called “Patriot Act,” if a man wants to change his last name upon marriage, he has to undergo a background check, put in an application, and pay a fee.²¹ The woman does not have to maneuver through these procedural hurdles because it is still accepted—and expected—that the woman will alter her identity and be subsumed under her husband's name, just as she was with her father.

In sum, the structure of modern, secular marriage is clearly patriarchal from its beginning in the courtship of the woman, to the engagement, wedding ceremony, and wedding vows. After the ceremony, patriarchy drives the relationship as well. Many fine critiques on prescriptive motherhood, dependent housewives, compulsory stay at home mothering, unilateral male decision-making, female career deferral, and unequal housekeeping have been put forth by others and it is not my objective to address them here.²² My intention has been to describe the foundations of a non-theistic union, in order to contrast it with Christian alternatives, to which I now turn.

Sacramental Marriage

Although there is some overlap between secular and Christian rituals leading up to marriage, the very cornerstone of Christian marriage is different from that of non-Christian unions. Christian marriage is, in fact, even a radical part of Christianity itself, since Christians believe that it is better not to be married (1 Cor 7:8); that some people are “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:12); and that under the new covenant believers are commanded to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 29:19), not to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28).

Yet early apologists like Augustine defended the “Excellence of Marriage” even as many other theologians drew on the

biblical witness to defend a life of celibacy.²³ Over time, as marriage became more common, entire theologies were developed to support those who had chosen not to follow the Lord's example or the model of Paul.²⁴ Christians thus have two primary paradigms for articulating marriage of believers: first, the Catholic sacramental marriage, and second, the Protestant covenantal marriage. I will begin with the Catholic sacrament of marriage.

Sacraments are graces, or ceremonial activities in which Christians participate. The sacraments have literal and symbolic value. Catholics maintain that Baptism, Eucharist, Confession, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Orders, and Extreme Unction are sacramental. The sacrament of Holy Orders is comprised of two exclusive alternatives, either ordination or matrimony. Ordination is defined by commitment to the Church and vows of poverty and celibacy. Catholic priesthood excludes women. Nuns are “consecrated,” not “ordained,” although they take vows of celibacy and poverty. Matrimony is defined by a commitment to one person in a sexual relationship for life, and may be undertaken by men or women.

Ephesians 5:31–32 provides the biblical grounds for adjudging marriage a sacrament in the Catholic Church. This passage indicates, “a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (NRSV). Augustine regarded this pericope as authoritative when he “proposed that there is a ‘sacramental bond’ forged between Christian couples at the time of marriage that linked them indissolubly together.”²⁵ While sacramental marriages may have earthly benefits like sexual pleasure, procreation, and companionship, the ultimate goal or *telos* is sanctification and growth in faith.

In the Catholic tradition, marriage is first and foremost part of Holy Orders, set within the larger purview of ecclesiastical sacraments. Thus, Catholics understand marriage as part of the peregrination (journey) toward God. In 1930, Pope Pius XI deemed that the “mutual molding of husband and wife, with determined effort to perfect each other, can ... be said to be the chief reason and purpose of matrimony.”²⁶ In order to achieve this perfecting of one another, there are certain parameters within Christian marriage to which both Catholics and evangelicals assent.

Since marriage is a sacrament directed by God, it is not to be broken, and therefore divorce is not permitted except in the case of *porneia* as stated in Matt 19:9–10 (where *porneia* is variously translated as “unchastity,” “marital unfaithfulness,” “immorality,” or “sexual immorality”). For some, a biblical theology for divorce understands *porneia* to be inclusive of adultery, emotional and physical neglect, abandonment, and abuse.²⁷ Many modern Christians are also grappling with the appropriateness of divorce under the *porneia* clause for men and women who unknowingly marry a homosexual or transgender spouse who “comes out” after vows are said. Both the former situation and those involving chronic addiction may fit under one or more of the aforementioned categories.²⁸ Regardless of

what may be considered *porneia*, it is divorce *and remarriage* that presents the theological conundrum, not “simple” divorce.

In addition to indissolubility, the unitive aspect of marriage is also the core of the couple’s relationship. Paul eradicates expected stereotypes of sexual need in 1 Cor 7:5 and, considering the partners equal to each other, encourages both the wife and husband to give to each other freely, and only have periods of celibacy if it is mutually agreeable and for prayer. This passage is the basis for comparable participation and initiation in marital relations, and moreover credits women with the same capacity for intimacy as men.²⁹ Other parameters of the Christian marriage include fruitfulness, which can be biological or spiritual, creative and expressive, or the sharing of a life-project.³⁰ Within these guidelines, the sacramentally married couple is equipped for the “mutual support” that the Code of Canon Law from 1918 indicated as a *telos* of marriage,³¹ as reiterated in 1983.³²

The theme of mutual spousal support is threaded throughout scripture. Genesis 2:23–25 specifies that a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. The apostle Paul claims that the disciples had “the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles” (1 Cor 9:5 NRSV). Reciprocity is the foundation of a Christian marriage and is part of the larger mutually submissive relationships that all Christian brothers and sisters have to each other. To be sure, marriage partners are first and foremost each other’s sibling in Christ and co-heirs to the kingdom of God. The sense that spouses have an obligation to each other is powerfully described in section 113 of the encyclical *Casti Connubii* where Pope Pius XI advises that couples should be prepared, “as far as they can, to help each other in sustaining the vicissitudes of life.”³³ Thus, the Catholic sacramental marriage is a first example of a thoroughly Christian union with many points of contact with Protestant covenantal marriage.

Covenantal Marriage

In the United States, marriage is a legally binding contract that is recognized and dissolved by the state. For Christians, especially Protestants, a theology of marriage goes beyond civil unions, a-theistic companionship, and patriarchal arrangements. Thus, marriage from a covenantal perspective is a union that binds spouses to each other through a joint commitment to God, first and foremost, and secondarily to each other. Retrieving the covenantal—not contractual—view of marriage for Christians is essential to repudiating patriarchal models of marriage, which denigrate women as being made in the full image of God and relegate women to domestic servitude. Covenantal marriage also rejects secular models of marriage, which are devoid of religious significance and thus do not carry spiritual weight. In order to appreciate the covenantal marriage, the historical roots of the concept must be unearthed.

A covenant is a solemn agreement between nations, peoples, or individuals, effecting a relationship that is binding and inviolable. Covenants often appear in ancient Near Eastern history and follow a formulaic outline, with stipulations and conditions. These specifications may include benefits and rewards—also dubbed

“blessings”—as well as penalties for breaking the covenant—also known as “curses.” Covenants typically have witnesses, a short locution on the relational history of those undertaking the covenant, and a ritual or symbol associated with the ratified covenant. In many cases, the chief parties must be fully consenting, rational, and autonomous even as the covenant extends to people who do not consent (e.g., the covenant Abraham made with God extends to all Israelites).

The Bible includes several varieties of covenants. Sexless, companionate covenants existed, for example, between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18:3) and between Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:16–17). Covenants were also made between God and God’s people. For instance, five biblical covenants enumerated in Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* are the Adamic covenant, Noachic covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Mosaic covenant and Davidic covenant.³⁴ I will briefly describe selected aspects of each in order to familiarize the reader with constitutive components.

The Adamic covenant stipulates that the first humans should be fruitful and multiply, act as guardians over the animals (but not eat them) and avoid the forbidden fruit (Gen 1:28–29, 3:16–17). Note that, since *’adam* means “earthling,” this covenant was between God and the “earthlings,” whom modern English-speaking theologians call Eve and Adam. The covenant was for both the woman and the man, even though male theologians have androcentrically named it after the man alone.

Like the Adamic covenant, the Noachic covenant also included a blessing to be fruitful and multiply. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow, which served as a physical manifestation reminding the parties of an intangible promise (Gen 9:13–17). Again, although male theologians have dubbed this promise the “Noachic” covenant, the specification of reproduction would have required the cooperation of Noah’s wife to fulfill. Christians would do well to recall the essential and non-replaceable role that women played in bringing the human side of covenants to fruition.

The Abrahamic covenant assured Abraham that he would procure land, spawn many descendants, and bless all nations through his biological lineage (Gen 17:2–9). The sign of this covenant was circumcision (Gen 17:10–14), still practiced today by numerous Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Sarah’s role in the covenant was integral and cannot be overlooked (Gen 17:15–21).

The Mosaic covenant is characterized by the Decalogue, which provided ritual law and enacted a sacrificial system of atonement (Deut 5). Finally, the Davidic covenant provides a root from the line of Jesse (Isa 11). Christians maintain that the Davidic covenant was fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 1:17, Rev. 5:5), which leads to the New Covenant. Under the New Covenant (or New Testament) God adopts Gentiles as spiritual children through the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross. The sign of the New Covenant is the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:20). A biblical theology of marriage parallels the ancient Near Eastern concept of covenant on several accounts.

A covenantal marriage is a graced covenant of love and fidelity between two baptized believers which, when sealed in the flesh through sexual intercourse, has God as author, witness, and

guarantor of the indissoluble bond.³⁵ Malachi 2:11–16 provides linguistic and social imagery for biblical, covenant marriage. Verse 12 affirms that the man who marries a pagan should be “cut off from the tents of Jacob.” The Hebrew *carat* (“cut off”) is a polysemy and may indicate circumcision as well as “cutting” a covenant. This visceral word choice calls a Jewish man back to the covenant of his forebears which required him to have descendants with Jewish women; the person that covenant is with, with whom that covenant is enacted by copulation, is his wife.

In Mal 2:14, the NASB translates *beriteka* as “covenant”: “the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.” The Hebrew *beriteka* is recorded in four places in the OT: 1 Kgs 15:19 and 2 Chron 16:3, “go, break your treaty with Baasha king”; Jer 14:21, “do not annul your covenant with us”; and Mal 2:14, “and your wife by covenant.”

Marriage is—at its core—a union between two people joined under the protective covenant of God. Christian covenantal marriage is analogically like a divinely arranged marriage where God orchestrates the means by which two people come together and provides a spiritual and social hedge of protection around them. God sees the relationship through until the end.³⁶ The purpose of the covenant marriage is the same as the purpose of the Christian life—to become more sanctified in relationship with God. The opening question of the Westminster Catechism proposes that the purpose of humankind is to “glorify God and enjoy God forever.”³⁷ Thus, Christians glorify and enjoy God through sanctification, and in this, become nearer to God.

A covenant marriage is, moreover, a formative union that has the *telos* of sanctifying spouses. Happiness, children, sex, wealth, and companionship are secondary to the pursuit of God manifested through loving devotion to a spouse as Jesus loves the church. Theologian Marva Dawn perceptively notes, “the Scriptures challenge us to direct our marriage outside of itself . . . its major purpose is to be an agent of the Kingdom of God.”³⁸ This theocentric articulation of marriage is consistent with the biblical witness that Christian life is primarily realized through spiritual formation. Of course, a marriage covenant is not merely a life-long witness to the world about God’s fidelity, or an exercise in sanctification. It actually involves another person. Thus, I will conclude this article with the implications of a covenantal marriage for those in the earthly relationship.

Conclusion

After God, the next most significant relationship in a married life is the spouse. Duties and obligations toward the spouse primarily are expressed by love and support, as portrayed in Eph 5:22–32. Spouses are to enjoy each other physically, as Song of Songs poetically demonstrates. In marriage, spouses should prioritize each other, attend to physical, emotional, and sexual requirements, and always seek the best for each other. Scripture praises the reciprocal relationship of the spouses and their responsibilities to each other. Thus, in many ways, modern legal structures of marriage are necessary—but not sufficient—for encompassing the entirety of married, Christian life. The

recent movement to legally institute covenant marriage has been underwhelming in part because covenants occur in the heart and soul, not on paper.

Christians must aspire to love God first, and then love their spouse through the love of God, as a co-heir of the kingdom of heaven, a sibling in Christ. Patriarchal forms of marriage—inclusive of courtship, engagement procedures, wedding ceremonies, wedding vows, and post-marriage norms—are not reflective of the gravity and glory of a covenant marriage.

Notes

1. Pius XI, *On Christian Marriage: Casti Connubii* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1930).
2. Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make us Holy More Than to Make us Happy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).
3. Arkansas’s Covenant Marriage Law, “Covenant Marriage Act of 2001.”
4. Paul F. Palmer, “Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant,” *TS* 33, no. 4 (1972): 639–65.
5. Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *A Model for Marriage: Covenant, Grace, Empowerment and Intimacy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006); Gary D. Chapman, *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).
6. Lauren Sandler, “The Only Child: Debunking the Myths,” *Time Magazine*, July 8, 2010, at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2002530-4,00.html>.
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8. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day: Donum Vitae* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987), II. A. 1.
9. Center for Disease Control/ National Center for Health Statistics, “Unmarried Childbearing,” Sept. 30, 2015, at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/unmarried-childbearing.htm>.
10. This paper does not defend or reject same-sex marriage and does not discuss such debates. My focus is patriarchy in opposite-sex secular marriage and Christ-centered Christian marriages.
11. Scott Drewianka, “How Will Reforms of Marital Institutions Influence Marital Commitment? A Theoretical Analysis,” *Review of Economics of the Household* 2, no. 3 (2004): 303–23, n3.
12. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 8.
13. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 108.
14. Thanks to Ronald W. Pierce for pointing this out to me at the Gender and Evangelical session at the ETS National Meeting, 2015, where I presented a version of this article.
15. For a description of many of these conventions, see Thomas Nelson, *Nelson’s Minister’s Manual*, NKJV Edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

16. The reference is to the Christian movement. See “True Love Waits 2016,” at <http://www.lifeway.com/n/Product-Family/True-Love-Waits>.

17. Diana E. H. Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

18. Jill Elaine Hasday, “Contest and Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape,” *California Law Review* 88, no. 5 (2000): 1373–1505.

19. Mary E. Knatterud, “Call Me Ms: A Word Doctor’s Titular Musings,” *Science* 27, no. 6 (2004): 203–7, 207n3.

20. “Also, of the descendants of the priests: the descendants of Habaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai (who had married one of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name)” (NRSV).

21. 107th Congress (2001–2002), “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001,” Public Law 107–56, Oct 26, 2001.

22. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Simon DeBeauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: WW Norton, 1995); Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Macmillan, 2002); Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2013).

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24. Sidney Callahan, *Beyond Birth Control: The Christian Experience of Sex* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); Dawn, *Sexual Character*; Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Dennis Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

25. Elizabeth Clark, ed., *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 6.

26. Pius XI, *On Christian Marriage*, 24.

27. See, for example, David Instone-Brewer, “What God Has Joined: What Does the Bible Really Teach About Divorce?,” *Christianity Today* 51, no. 10 (Oct 5, 2007): 26.

28. There is paltry little written from a Christian perspective on the pastoral, ethical, and theological challenges of discovering that a spouse is transgender (here I use the term to include cross-dressing, gender dysphoric, and pre- and post-transitioning people). I refer the reader to Sheila Jeffrey, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (London: Routledge, 2014), ch. 4, for groundbreaking ethnographic and philosophical work on the effects of (male) transgender husbands “coming out” to their wives.

29. Cristina Richie, “Can Sex Be Egalitarian?,” *Mutuality* 18, no. 4 (2011): 10–11.

30. Matt. 19:9; James F. Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” *TS* 56, no. 4 (1995): 709–29; Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 227.

31. Code of Canon Law (1918), preliminary notions, article II section 1.

32. John Haas, “The Inseparability of the Two Meanings of the Marriage Act,” in *Reproductive Technologies, Marriage and the Church*, ed. D. G. McCarthy (Braintree: The Pope John XXIII Center, 1988), 89–106, at 98. See also *The Code of Canon Law* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983), title VII can. 1057 section 2.

33. Pius XI, *On Christian Marriage*, 113.

34. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

35. See also Dennis Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 97 et al.

36. The reality of divorce presents a troubling affront to the credibility of a God-sustained covenant marriage. I am unable to engage this apologetic issue here, but refer the reader to the short section in this article on Matt 19:10 as well as the theological concept of “already-not yet” inaugurated eschatology.

37. The Westminster Divine Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Full Scripture Proof Texts* (Lindenhurst: Great Christian Books, 2013).

38. Dawn, *Sexual Character*, 48.

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