

MARRIAGE IN THE EYES OF GOD: A PRACTICAL DEFINITION

A Pre-marital Counseling Monograph

By

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Talbot Seminary Doctoral Program 1983, Revised September 2010

Marriage in the Eyes of God: A Practical Definition

Jeff and Ann sat in silence. The look on their faces told me to proceed with caution, because, like so many other couples I have counseled in preparation for marriage, they were baffled and a little embarrassed at my question.

“What is marriage in the eyes of God,” I repeated. Then, quickly, to relieve the tension, I broke the silence and guided the couple through a process that would lead them to understand and value the biblical definition of marriage.

That’s what this article is about. It will provoke your thinking to develop a biblical, usable idea of what this “blessed estate” which we call “marriage” really is.

Many couples, engaged or married, are at a loss to define the elements of marriage that are important to God. The lack of clarity as to God’s design for marriage is complicated by the elaborate traditions of the wedding ceremony. While I am all for the traditional ceremony, which can be beautiful and meaningful, it is difficult to get our minds to untangle what is traditional from what is biblical, essential, and mandatory “. . . in the eyes of God.”

Is all this important? Absolutely! Without a clear understanding of the divine design for marriage, our society is slowly re-writing its moral concepts of marriage and family relationships. The only safeguard against distortion and abuse is to return to the Word of God for answers. Any definition that does not take into account the biblical “stuff” concerning marriage will prove inadequate. What does the Bible teach, and where does it teach it? That’s what we need to re-discover.

This discussion is intended to be more than a statement of doctrine. It is a carefully structured thought process designed to lead the reader to understand and value biblical marriage in a practical way. The approach was worked out carefully during numerous pre-marital counseling situations over the years.

Let’s get started. In order to arrive at a biblical definition of marriage which integrates the available material in both Old and New Testaments, let us take four steps of investigation together. These steps are:

- A. **“Subtractional Analysis”** – A Game with a Purpose.
- B. **Scriptural Approach** – What the Bible Says about Marriage.
- C. **Specific Amplification** – The “Fine Print” of the Marriage Covenant.
- D. **Supportive Addition** – How Walking in the Spirit Empowers the Marital Covenant.
- E. **Special Addendum** – FYI: Does Intercourse Constitute Marriage?

A. “SUBTRACTIONAL ANALYSIS” – A GAME WITH A PURPOSE.

That’s just a fancy name for a game we play in counseling. “Think back to the most recent, or most prominent, wedding ceremony you’ve attended,” I instruct the young couple. “What part of the ceremony really constitutes marriage from God’s point of view?” In other words, “What will be important and essential to God in your up-coming wedding ceremony? What’s God looking to see?”

This is how the game is played: Start subtracting things, eliminating things, we all usually associate with a wedding ceremony, and with each thing you eliminate ask, “Is what is left of the shrinking ceremony still marriage in the eyes of God?”

You can eliminate, for instance, the flower girl. The ring bearer. How about the candles? The center aisle? The best man? Kneeling bench? Can you eliminate the church building, the organ, the music, the tux and the gown, or the photographer (especially the photographer!)?

Which of these things, if any, are essential to a valid, binding marriage? Remember, in order for the element of the wedding to be essential it must find its validity “in the eyes of God,” and therefore, in the Word of God.

Now, how about eliminating the ring? How about the congregation? How about – careful now – the minister?

(You may have guessed it already. We are working back to two naked people in a vacant lot! If this sounds a lot like Adam and His bride Eve the Garden of Eden, you’re on the right track. We’ll get to that garden later.)

It is delightful to watch an engaged couple searching their minds, searching the face of each other. Most commonly, they begin a mental search of what they know of the Word of God to try to find a biblical ceremony that would constitute a precedent for modern day traditional practices. They find none. Oddly, the only Jewish wedding ceremony we find in the New Testament was the one Jesus and His disciples attended in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11), and the only detail we know about that wedding is that they ran out of wine. That make my point. Are you ready to press on to find the answer?

B. SCRIPTURAL APPROACH – WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT MARRIAGE.

Since marriage is such an important subject, we are correct in expecting the Word of God to enlightens us about God’s requirements for marriage. And it is a reasonable assumption the we as Christians should look first for definitive material in the New Testament.

This leads us to an intriguing complication. We do not find in the New Testament any specific wedding ceremony described which would allow us to examine its content. While we have reference to the marriage at Cana of Galilee and the use of the marriage figure in certain of Christ's parables, definitive details are not recorded for us.

➔ **New Testament Marriage built on Old Testament Foundations.** However, the basis for God-sanctioned marriage is everywhere assumed in the New Testament, and occasionally we find Old Testament principles of marriage reiterated (e.g., Matthew 19:3-9; I Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31). One gets the distinct impression from reading in the New Testament that marriage was clearly defined in the minds of the writers and the readers.

The New Testament writers seem to be more concerned about clarifying the specific role relationships within Christian marriage (e.g., Ephesians 5:21ff.), than in defining biblical marriage. It would appear that the biblical definition of marriage was sufficiently clear in the minds of both Jewish and Gentile readers that a restatement was unnecessary.

This leads us to the conclusion that the clearest definition of marriage should be sought in the Old Testament, while clarification and amplification of the marriage principles to New Testament times should be found in the New Testament.

➔ **Malachi's Clue.** The last book of the Old Testament gives us a thought-provoking clue. Malachi gives voice to God's displeasure with the divorce practice in Israel. The context of chapter two reveals their abhorrent practice. Jewish men were divorcing their wives for indiscriminate, non-biblical reasons, and were marrying others. As a result, their worship was rejected by God. These men could not understand the Lord's disfavor. God reasons with them through Malachi:

*Yet you say, 'for what reason?' Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by **covenant** (Mal. 2:14).*

There we have it -- the all important clue! **God regards marriage as a covenant.** As a matter of fact, this passage shows that the covenant is binding in the eyes of God regardless of the human attempt to break it legally. God himself witnesses the covenant of marriage, and in this context, He is bringing these Jewish men back to face their own embarrassing treachery in breaking the covenant by indiscriminant divorce. For a parallel example of covenant breaking on the part of a woman, study the context of Proverbs 2:17.

➔ **What is a Covenant?** To study the concept of a covenant in Scripture is a rewarding experience. Covenants were made by God, by saints, and by sinners. Some covenants were so elaborate as to require high ceremony in which the parties to the covenant would slaughter an animal and together would walk between the pieces, sealing this covenant “in blood” before the eyes of God. Other covenants were casual or flippant, as in the case of a vow or sworn oath. The Savior warned us against these casual oaths (Matthew 5:33-37; 23:16-22).

In order to get a broader understanding of the covenant; let’s look at the basic characteristics of a covenant in general. There are seven major factors involved in a biblically defined covenant.

1. NUMERICAL FACTOR: How many parties are bond together in covenant? A **unilateral covenant**, involving a commitment of oneself to oneself, is illustrated in God’s covenant to Abraham in Genesis 12. A **bilateral covenant**, involving the commitment of two people to each other toward some goal or purpose, is illustrated by the marriage vow described in Malachi 2:14. Then there is the **multilateral covenant**, involving a group of people bound by affirmation toward a specific goal, illustrated by the choice of the people of Israel to follow the Lord in Joshua 24:25-27.

Marriage is a bilateral covenant. Even in the cases of plural marriages in the Old Testament, there was no covenantal relationship between the several wives. Jacob, for instance, made a covenant with Leah, which he would not break. Seven years later he entered into another bilateral covenant with Rachel. While the biblical pattern is clearly for monogamy, as will be seen later, Old Testament characters entered into more than one bilateral covenant, and stayed true to each of them until death. The bilateral covenant is the most common in Scripture, and directly relates to marriage.

2. LEGITIMACY FACTOR: Are the parties free to covenant in the will of God? If the nature of a bilateral (two party) covenant is agreed to be mutually exclusive, then a party could not contract another covenant in violation of this first. Did you follow that? Simply, a previous marriage covenant, if still in effect, makes a second marriage illegitimate in the eyes of God. Revisit the Malachi 2:14 passage above for evidence. You must be free from other marital covenants in order to legitimately enter into a marriage.

Additionally, God’s design from the dawn of creation is for marriage to be a life-long covenant between one MAN and one WOMAN. It is codified in His brilliant construction of bisexual reproduction. Let me be clear: Modern attempts to solemnize same-sex marriage relationship in the eyes of God are illegitimate. Paul, in Romans 1, makes this abundantly clear.

3. TEMPORAL FACTOR: How long does the covenant obligation last? Covenants were contracted for a period of time necessary to accomplish the goal of the contract. God’s unilateral covenant

with Abraham, for instance, requires action that spans generations reaching forward to an ultimate fulfillment in the future.

The Nazarene vow (Numbers 6) was a dedication and separation unto the Lord for a specified number of days. Jezebel, on the other hand, made a twenty-four hour covenant before her gods to make Elijah like one to the priests of her own religion whom Elijah had slain (I Kings 19:1-2).

Both the Old and New Testament agree that the temporal factor in a marriage covenant is for the duration of earthly life (Romans 7:1-3). There can be no debate on this subject. Jesus Christ himself, reflecting on the biblical elements of marriage, insists, *“What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate”* (Matthew 19:6b).

4. INTELLECTUAL FACTOR: What are the specific responsibilities of the covenant? In bilateral covenants, as in any covenant, both parties must understand the specific responsibilities and goals of the commitment that binds them by covenant. One would be foolish, for instance, to sign a business partnership contract on the strength of emotion independent of a clear understanding of “fine print” of the document. Understanding marriage, with its privileges and responsibilities, is a must. The responsibilities were more commonly known throughout the ancient world. By contrast, in our time of declining moral values, adequate pre-marital counseling by biblically oriented pastors cannot be over-emphasized. Young people need to know exactly what they are committing to do, what God will hold them to do in marriage.

5. EMOTIONAL FACTOR: Why is entering this covenant attractive to you? In order to enter freely into a covenant, the commitment must be seen as desirable. The parties to a covenant must weigh carefully the responsibilities with the advantages, the duties with the delights, with the result that they are “sold” on the desirability of the ultimate purpose of the covenant.

In the bilateral covenant of marriage the absence of the emotional element is seldom a problem. Love draws the partners together. The romance of courtship should steadily lead toward a willingness to invest oneself in the life of the other.

The danger to a marriage covenant usually results, not from the absence of the emotional factor, but from its dominance. Emotions can overshadow intelligence. This is why an engagement period should be long enough to be able to balance the various factors, which lead toward that valid covenant before God. True love has the ability to wait.

6. VOLITIONAL FACTOR: Are you ready to commit? Having understood the conditions, and having arrived at a place of desire and enthusiasm for the covenant, the decisive step must be taken. A choice must be made once and for all. The parties to the covenant must say, “I will.” This declaration of intent and resolve sets the covenant in motion. God is listening for these words.

7. EVIDENTIAL FACTOR: Is this covenant publicly established? A covenant, in order to be binding, requires witnesses. Today contracts are signed before a Notary Public. In Joshua 24, a pillar of rock was set up as a witness and reminder of the covenant made that day. God's covenants are verified in writing for the whole world to read and believe. And marriage covenants are to be witnessed by God and society (Malachi 2:14; Proverbs 2:17).

These seven factors are true of all covenants generally, and bare specific relationship to the marriage covenant. Now let's consider the specific elements of the marriage covenant.

C. SPECIFIC AMPLIFICATION – THE “FINE PRINT” OF THE MARRIAGE COVENANT.

Now that we know that marriage is a covenant (Malachi 2:14), Let's ask the question, “Does the Bible tell us what the terms of the covenant are?” The answer is a resounding “Yes!” Have you guessed yet where in the Bible the specifics are found? All sign posts in the New Testament and Old Testament point in one direction – to the dawn of man's creation. Our journey to find the biblical definition of marriage comes to rest in an intimate garden setting, with a man and a woman and their God (Genesis 2). We pick up the story with a dilemma – Adam was alone.

...But for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 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. 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 the man.' (Genesis 2:20b-23)

Flowing out of this description of the manner and purpose of the creation of the woman, our creator God makes a great pronouncement concerning the relation of a man to his wife.

For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

Notice that this text, which is so widely quoted in the New Testament, stands at the dawn of creation. It stands outside and above all ages, changes, and dispensations. It even predates the fall of man into sin. It is universally applicable to all times and to every generation. It is a reflection of God's will for all humanity, not just Israelites or Christians. Marriage, therefore, is a social unit of divine creation, rooted in divine will, and shaped by divine wisdom for our blessing.

So now, let us ask the original question again: “What is marriage in the eyes of God?” The answer is this: That part of the wedding ceremony which calls for a covenant, a commitment to one's spouse, in the presence of God answering to the terms of Genesis 2:24 constitutes marriage in the eyes

of the Creator. Adam and Eve's experience demonstrates that wholehearted commitment to one's spouse in the presence of God is the essence of marriage. So, the elements that we find in Genesis 2:24 should be valued and included in modern wedding ceremonies.

Let's put together a practical, working definition of the covenant of marriage. It involves four elements – It is a (1) mutually exclusive, (2) temporally permanent, (3) comprehensively intimate, and (4) civil/socially recognized COVENANT. Like the four legs of a table or chair, these four elements bring stability and function to marriage, and ensure a couple that they are proceeding in the will of God. Let's consider them separately.

➔ **1. It is a Mutually Exclusive Covenant.** God listens in on weddings. He is listening for specific things. He is interested in the commitment of the couple to each other as evidenced verbally before witnesses. Every couple should be aware of the seriousness, the solemnity, of the vows they take before God. They must understand what they are pledging

First, they are committing to a mutually exclusive relationship. This is inherent in the words "...leave his father and his mother..." This means that there must be a change in the relationship of the couple with their parents, allowing for the establishment of a new household with its own authority base.

Implied in these words is that the couple commit themselves to an exclusion of any third party. It's interesting to note that God the Son in quoting this passage clarifies this implication. He said that, "...the two shall become one flesh," not "the three," or "the four." (Cf. Matt. 19:5)

In pledging themselves to a mutually exclusive relationship, a couple will find the security and intimacy uniquely their own. Any third party who insinuates himself or herself in between the marital affection of the couple are illegitimate. Where they are allowed to intrude, the covenant is violated (Matthew 19:9).

➔ **2. It is a Temporally Permanent Covenant.** Second, they are committing themselves to a committed relationship for the rest of their lives. This concept comes from the words "...and shall cleave to his wife" (Genesis 2:24). The temporal permanence of the marriage covenant is supported by Paul's discussion in Romans 7:1-3. There he indicates that the law is clear – a woman is bound to her husband as long as her husband lives. Widows and widowers are free to remarry in the eyes of God because the death of their spouse effectively terminates the marriage covenant before God.

Couples should consider the seriousness of their commitment. They are pledging their hearts to each other for life. The concept of a trial marriage is totally foreign to the Word of God. Christian couples, in particular, should pray through the matter of their commitment before they take their vows. They will not be allowed to use the excuse later on that they "married out of the will of God." The fact

is, God takes their vows seriously. At the moment you say “I do,” your spouse becomes the will of God for you, for life. Think it over. Pray it over. God will bless you with the power to keep this part of the covenant. Faith lays hold of this promise, and commits with resolve for life.

Notice that the “leaving” and “cleaving” principles find their way into the traditional marriage ceremony in the words “...and forsaking all others, cleave ye only unto him/her so long as ye both shall live?” To this question each partner is to respond with the words, “I will.” Remember, God is listening.

➔ **3. It is a Comprehensively Intimate Covenant.** The covenant brings God's blessed permission and blessing to the marriage bed. The initial sexual intimacy on the wedding night is traditionally referred to as "consummation" of the wedding vows. We derive this concept from the words, “...and they shall become one flesh.” Most obviously, what is spoken of here is a physical oneness of a married couple through sexual intercourse. Physical intimacy seals the covenant, and is proper only after the commitment has been made before God (Hebrews 13:4).

Couples should understand that sex within marriage is holy. It is both a privilege and a responsibility. God created human beings male and female, with differing characteristics to their physiology and sexuality. Paul instructs married Christians that they should not deprive their partner of intimacy except in cases of agreement for a specific time and purpose, because he was aware that protracted abstinence could give grounds for Satan to tempt at a point of vulnerability to the unfulfilled sex drive (I Corinthians 7:3-5). The purpose of sex within marriage, therefore, is for more than bearing children. It is for procreation, recreation and consideration. Sexual pleasure is God's gift to you.

But this marital "intimacy" implies more – a comprehensive intimacy. Physical oneness clearly and perfectly illustrates the total oneness of the couple – **physically, spiritually, socially, financially, emotionally, psychologically, parental, etc.** – as partners in a united journey in fulfilling the will of God for the united life of the couple. They are “joined together” (Matthew 19:6) by God into a one-flesh unit, and this unit becomes a pure and fit symbol of Christ's intimate love union with His bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:25-32).

➔ **4. It is a Civil/Socially Recognized Covenant.** While Genesis 2:24 describes marriage in its simplest terms, there is another element which must be added in light of other references. Indeed, for Adam and Eve in the garden, God was their witness. They had no church, no flower girl, no ring bearer, no center aisle, no photographer, and for that matter, no tux and gown. And yet their covenant constituted valid marriage in the eyes of God. However, this does not give credence to the modern practice of common-law (undocumented) marriages. While Genesis 2:24 is the earliest and clearest passage on the marital commitment, it is not the only passage to deal with the subject.

Paul (Romans 12:13ff.) and Peter (I Peter 2:13ff.) make it clear that it is the God-given responsibility of all Christians to submit themselves to every biblically compatible ordinance of human government. Formalized, publicly documented marriages were the rule in biblical times. There was no doubt who was married to whom.

Within the societal context of the United States of America, and the laws of each of the fifty states, the documentation of marriages is mandated by law. It is a good law! Christians have no rationale for circumventing it. Love is essential to marriage, but in the eyes of God love is not what binds marriage together. It is the covenant that He witnesses that binds them in His sight. A marriage license should never be seen to be a restrictive, oppressive piece of paper to a Christian who has entered into a valid marriage covenant. It is as honorable as it is legal, and affords protection for both the couple and their children.

Civil-social recognition in our society is inescapable. It is the fourth indispensable leg, without which the table of marriage would be unstable and vulnerable to a weakened commitment.

D. SUPPORTIVE ADDITION – HOW WALKING IN THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS THE COVENANT.

While there may not be New Testament examples of wedding ceremonies available for our scrutiny, the covenant nature of marriage as set forth at creation is affirmed in the Gospels and Epistles (cf. Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; I Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31; Romans 7:1-3; Hebrews 13:4). The New Testament assumes the changeless character of marriage as a God-blessed covenant.

But while God's order for marriage was given to our first parents, Adam and Eve, in a perfect environment, a tragic event occurred in Genesis 4 -- SIN. Sin distorts everything, even marriage. As a result of the Fall, the marriage relationship has experienced strain and breakage because of the selfish inclinations of the human sin nature in all of us. God lays out the result of this sin in Genesis 3:16.

“To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in child birth, in pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’”

Recent focus has been placed on the meaning of the “desiring” of the wife and the “ruling” of the husband. The traditional understanding has been that God was here establishing the role relationship of authority and submission in marriage. As a result of the fall, a woman was placed in the role of submitting to her husband and the husband was given the responsibility to rule over his wife. However, we need to take a closer look.

Certain exegetical insights tend to lead us toward a different interpretation. This passage seems to be speaking of the imbalance that would result in marriage because of sin. Note that within the context of the curse, what is being described is less than God's ideal, and contrary to the original plan.

The language, “...*your desire shall be for your husband,*” finds very few parallels in Scripture. The one that bears most directly on the interpretation of this passage is Genesis 4:7, where God tells Cain that “...*Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.*” Here the term “desire” is clearly a desire to dominate Cain, not a desire to be submissive to Cain. Sin, depicted as a crouching, carnivorous animal ready to pounce, desired to master Cain. Cain is counseled by God to meet the challenge by mastering sin’s temptation.

Just as the desire of sin is to master Cain, so also would the desire of the sin-natured wife be to master, control and dominate her husband. The man’s reaction would be to become an insensitive tyrant in his own home. What we have here is an accurate picture of the upheaval in God’s beautiful plan of marriage as a result of the selfishness of the flesh being turned loose in the marriage. That indeed is a curse!

I can safely say that behind the great majority of marital relational difficulties I have dealt with is selfish pride. It may disguise itself as pride, indifference, insensitivity, and lack of submission, self-defense or any number of evidences that can be discerned by the objective observer. It is simply the product of our fallenness, our self-centeredness, and our alienation from the perfect will of God through our sin nature.

What about the Christian who has been born again by grace, so that he has become a “new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17)? It is precisely to this question that the New Testament speaks most clearly. Building on the Old Testament concept of marriage, which predates the curse, the New Testament writers responded to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in declaring the principles whereby Christians could rise above the prompting of the sin nature because of their spiritual union with God through grace. Paul says, “*For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace*” (Romans 6:14).

This general principle is supplemented by another great truth. “*But this I say,*” Paul writes, “*walk by the spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh*” (Galatians 5:16). The uniqueness of our union with Christ is that he has given to us His Holy Spirit, who is able to fulfill the righteousness of God’s holy requirement in us as we allow Him full control (Romans 8:1-9).

These general principles have specific application to the role relationships within marriage in Ephesians 5. There, Paul predicates his instructions to married Christians upon their being controlled by God the Holy Spirit (5:18). Based on their reliance on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, wives are instructed to submit to their husbands (5:22-23), and husbands are commanded to love their wives (verse 25ff.).

Why are these commandments necessary? Is it not obvious that wifely submission and husbandly love, which were part of God’s creative order (I Corinthians 11:2-15; 14:34-35; and

especially 1 Timothy 2:11-15) do not come naturally? By nature, we humans are fallen, and act contrary to the will of God with regard to this authority-submission pattern. It is for this reason that Christians must study the Word of God to discover the will of God in relation to their role in marriage. And what they discover they can appropriate by an act of choice, through the power of the Holy Spirit, within the context of their home.

Christian couples should rejoice in the resource of this secret agent, the Holy Spirit, who underwrites the specific will of God in their marriage. How important it is for Christians to begin this union in fellowship and submission to Him.

God never intended that there should be tyranny within the marriage. The Bible declares that men and women are totally equal in the sight of God in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The submission of a Christian wife to her husband should be viewed as the free act of obedience of one that desires to obey the commandment of the Lord. She is co-equal with her husband, just as Christ, who is equal with God, submitted himself to the Father (Philippians 2:5-8).

In this connection, notice that there are no commands that a man be head of his household. There are statements that declare that he is the head, but no commands. Where then does he get his headship? He is head of the wife by the free and willingness choice of his wife to submit to him as unto the Lord. The husband is simply commanded to love. His headship is the result of the submission of his wife. Therefore, there can be no tyranny in God ideal for marriage.

To summarize the supportive additions to this discussion, we see that the pattern for marriage was originated in specific terms by God at the dawn of human existence. It is universally applicable. Sin is responsible for warping God's perfect plan in marriage. The New Testament builds on a uniform concept of marriage in Scripture. And finally, Christians who have the indwelling Holy Spirit may experience by divine power, through faith, God's perfect design for marriage.

So, What is marriage in the eyes of God? It is a bilateral covenant taken before our Lord, by which a couple commit themselves to a mutually exclusive, temporally permanent relationship with each other, and thereafter consummate their union in physical and comprehensive oneness, having taken the required steps of civil-social recognition before the state and the world. In "leaving," and "cleaving" and "joining together," they form that unit of blessing that was designed by God from creation. While sin threatens on all sides, God has made a way through Christ at Calvary for the redemption of their home through the salvation of each of them as individuals. With Christ as Lord of their lives, Christ can be Lord of their marriage. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, a couple can find a home-life in the will of God free of tyranny. Everything God created was good. God created marriage, and those who honor God's definition of marriage will discover this to be true. It is very, very good!

E. SPECIAL ADDENDUM – FYI: DOES INTERCOURSE CONSTITUTE MARRIAGE?

This next section answers a specialized, troubling question about the implications of sexual relations before marriage. If this is not a significant issue to you, the reader, consider yourself finished with this monograph. However, whether you are in need to know what the Bible teaches about pre-marital intercourse or are just curios, let understanding be tempered with God's grace as you read on.

It is an interesting side point that some Bible scholars view the act of sexual intercourse to imply a covenant as binding as marriage itself. The primary text for this is I Corinthians 6:16. There, a casual relationship with a prostitute is said to make a person “one flesh” with that harlot.

While I agree that fornication is absolutely condemned in Scripture, I have a difficult time concluding that there is an “implied covenant” in physical intimacies. Since a covenant, as we have just described, involves a number of factors not present in such casual unions, it is hard for me to see how this could constitute a binding covenant.

My understanding is that sexual intercourse is an essential element, but not the only element that constitute marriage in the eyes of God. Human sexuality was God’s idea. Therefore, it is reasonable to understand that God has the exclusive right to regulate its use. Our sexual capability is a procreative factor built into our humanity designed by God exclusively for the marriage relationship. “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4).

Paul’s purpose in I Corinthians 6:16 is to encourage moral purity in the Corinthian converts based on an *argumentum ad absurdum*. Drawing from the Old Testament text, he showed how ridiculous it would be to take members that belonged to Christ and make them members of a harlot. The reasoning is powerful. The conclusion obvious. “Flee immorality.” But the text does not inherently teach that a marital covenant in the full sense of the biblical term is implied in the casual sexual union.

In the admonition “flee immorality” (I Corinthians 6:18), Paul is clearly saying, “don’t start fornicating.” But since this sinful practice within the carnal Corinthian church is evidenced by the very occurrence of this discussion in the text, what is the remedy for those who had engaged in sexual activities with a prostitute? The text does not demand that one treat the prostitute as a wife, nor does it require divorcing the prostitute, either of which solution would have been expected if sexual union “equals” a marriage covenant. Rather, the solution of the text is to understand the nature of the sacredness of the Christian’s body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, to treat the body as God’s possession, and to keep it separate as unto the Lord in purity. (Note that the admonition of 1 Corinthians 7:2 is separated from this context by a very strong transitional phraseology in 7:1).

Viewing marriage as a bilateral covenant for life, it is easy to see why fornication is sin. Several working definitions will prove clarifying. **Pre-marital** intimacy is sin because it is devoid of covenant. This is referred to as fornication (I Corinthians 6:18). **Extramarital** intimacy is sin because it is in violation of a covenant. This is referred to as adultery (Matthew 19:9).

Returning to our main point, one does not accidentally "back into a covenant" without knowing it. Pre-marital sex is a sin, not a covenant. Sin is anything that falls short of God's glory, that transgresses a divine boundary line, that misses the mark of God's highest, holy will as laid out in Scripture. Pre-marital sex is outside the specific will of God, misses the mark of righteousness, and brings discredit on the Christian faith, family, church, and personal self. But it is forgivable.

The marriage covenant involved understandable and specific terms, into which one enters by conscious choice. Backing away from the pressure to push for a "shotgun wedding," the couple who have had pre-marital relations should embrace the teaching of Scripture, repent together of their sin, and chose purity in the grace and power of God in the future. In the case of a pre-marital pregnancy, the new life must be respected, his/her well-being safeguarded, and an appeal to God's redeeming grace to bless this child as a precious life that can bring glory to God. While the pregnancy is a weighty factor in the decision of the couple to marry, it is essential that the couple first get right with the Lord and each other, and then seek earnestly divine guidance as to His will for their marrying.