

# MARRIAGE AS A SPIRITUAL COVENANT

Revised and adapted from Dr. Clark Warren's "The Triumphant Marriage" and Bill Gothard's "The True Significance of the Wedding Covenant."

*"Set me as a seal upon thy heart..."* Song of Solomon 8:6

## Introduction: Refreshing & instilling marital commitment

- A. We have not entered into a "marriage **contract**" but a "marriage **covenant!**" (Mal 2:14, Prov 2:16f)
- B. What exactly is a covenant?
  - 1. A Hebrew word: "In the sense of cutting; a compact made by passing between pieces of flesh"
  - 2. Examples are found in Gen 15:9-10, 17-18 and Jer 34:13, 18
- C. Our forefathers began many wedding traditions and understood this well. Over time, the original meanings have been lost.
  - 1. "The True Significance of the Wedding Covenant" booklet opened my eyes. (\$2 from IBLP Publications Office, Box 1, Oak Brook Ill 60522-3001) Fascinating!
  - 2. One covenant symbol: the different aisles for the bride or groom to make his/her way to the altar to exchange vows (learn the original purpose and more examples later!)
- D. A marriage is **sacred**. It is spiritual...heavenly. (Matt 19:6)
  - 1. A "holy triune not a human duet!!"
  - 2. If you break your vow to your mate, you may still have to keep your vow to God ("until death do you part" not "until divorce do you part").
  - 3. "It is a snare to a man to say rashly, 'It is holy' and then to later make inquiry." Prov 20:25 (½ of all divorces in 1997 occurred within the first two years!)
  - 4. The difference between a **covenant and a contract**:
    - a. A covenant is based on **trust**---a contract on **distrust!**
    - b. A covenant is based on **unlimited responsibility** --a contract on **limited liability**.  
*Illustration:* God's promise to Abraham and all He went through to keep His Word demonstrate unlimited responsibility. Just as the traditional words "...for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health."
    - c. A covenant is **lifelong and not to be broken** --a contract can be **voided by mutual consent**.  
*Illustration:* The rainbow in the sky reminds everyone that God's promise has no statute of limitations.

## I. COVENANT SYMBOLISM IN THE WEDDING CEREMONY

- A. The groom enters first--why? He is the initiator of the covenant.
- B. The father walks the bride down the aisle--why?
  - 1. The parents are an important part of the ceremony.

2. The father's duty is to present his daughter as a pure gift. (Deut 22:13-21)
  3. The white dress symbolizes purity.
- C. The father gives the bride away to show the full blessing of the parents. This is the formal transfer of authority from the father to the groom after he has asked for the daughter's hand in marriage. (Num 30:4-8).
- D. The ring is a "token of the covenant."
- E. The couple is introduced to establish the changing of names.
1. *Illustration:* Abram's name was changed to Abraham.
  2. Spiritually we wear the "new name" of Christian once we enter into a covenant relationship with God upon baptism.
- F. What is the significance of the guest book?
1. It should be signed after—not before. It indicates there are witnesses to the covenant who have a vested interest in supporting the marriage.
  2. The Armenians have a low divorce rate. When a couple gets in trouble, the godparents move in until they get it settled!
- G. What is the purpose of the receiving line? To give a blessing to the couple as in Ruth 4:11, 14f.
- H. The food at the reception is for the covenant celebration. This is very similar to the Lord's supper.
- I. The couple feeds each other cake and they become "one flesh" in the eating of the cake, just as we become one in the eating of the bread. (I Cor 11:24f)

## II. DO WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH KEEPING VOWS & COMMITMENTS TODAY?

- A. A lax attitude in general makes the taking of our vows seriously difficult.
1. Ronald Reagan in 1981 fired the air traffic controllers because they broke a contractual agreement. Doubtful that would happen today.
  2. During the revolutionary war both sides respected vows so much that they avoided taking prisoners. Instead they simply made them promise they would not return to fight again. If they violated their honor and did so, then they were executed.
- B. Examine these **scriptures that apply to the taking of vows:**
1. Ecc 5:2-7
  2. Ps 15:4b (Zion dweller - swears to his own hurt and changes not!!!)
  3. Num 30:2
  4. I Sam 1:11-21 (Hannah's vow)
  5. Josh 9:16-20
  6. Matt 12: 36f (Jesus)
- C. **Commitment: the cornerstone of a triumphant marriage!**
1. Consider the following quote about the nature of commitment:

**"COMMITMENT** ... is what transforms a promise into reality. It is the words that speak boldly of your intentions. It is the actions that speak louder than words. It is making the time when there is none, coming through time after time, year after year. Commitment is the stuff character is made of, the power to change the face of things. It is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism."

2. "Marriage demands toughness, and toughness proceeds out of commitment. No marriage will ever be stronger than the commitments that serve as its infrastructure."

D. We ask couples to say some hard-hitting, heavy-duty vows before they get married. So where do we go wrong?

1. Are vows **treated superficially** with the preacher left to "perform the ceremony? The couple is so nervous they hardly think about or realize the significance .
  - a. I encourage couples to **write their own vows** and wedding ceremony.
  - b. Suggestion: **Save the ceremony and go over it ...at least once a year on your wedding anniversary.**
2. It is important that what you have vowed to each other be kept current and fresh! It is so easy to forget.

E. **What matters is your current level of commitment**

1. Often, the vows seem less vital and are less passionately held as time passes.
2. Sadly, many only vaguely remember what they said.
3. The commitment should be *active* not passive!!  
*Illustration:* One may stay in a marriage by being passive. S/he doesn't leave, but doesn't *do anything* to make the marriage better either. Don't forget the *positive*, radical part of **active commitment**.

### III. WE NEED THOROUGH, INSIGHTFUL UNDERSTANDING OF MARITAL PROMISES

A. We need a "promise orientation" that is highly enlightened.

B. The traditional vows have **6 separate parts:**

1. I will **love you** as long as we both live (kindness, sacrifice)
2. I will **cherish and honor** you as long as we both live (thoughtfulness, attentiveness)
3. I will be to you **what a husband or wife owes to a spouse** (dedication to doing my part and meeting the other's needs)
4. I will **take you as you are** (acceptance)
5. I will **forsake all others** (faithfulness!!)
6. I will do all these things **for better or worse, in sickness and in health** (unconditionally serve and stay with you for as long we live)

C. **WOW! What does that mean, practically speaking??**

1. If we disagree, frustrate, disappoint, or hurt each other....?
2. If I think I don't get what I deserve...?
3. If I express how I feel, regardless of hardship...? **I will keep my vows!**

D. **Now, REHEARSE THE PROMISES until they are BURNED INTO OUR BRAINS.**

1. Marriage vows are usually spoken a single time, thus they have very little value in a marital crisis.
2. Dr. Clark Warren, author of "The Triumphant Marriage", suggests a change in frequency of the marriage vows.
  - a. Instead of "once-in-a-lifetime", 2 or 3 times a week for the first 10 years, and at least once a week for the rest of the marriage.
  - b. Verbalized regularly over a long period of time for tremendous power!!

- c. HOW? Find a way that is natural, meaningful, and even fun!  
BE CREATIVE!!
- 3. What about you?
  - a. The more you can find **new and creative ways** to affirm the commitment the better.
  - b. **Recite it over and over** so that when troubles come the brain will trigger new ideas on how to fulfill these vows!!

**CONCLUSION:**

- A. **Do your homework!** Write your own concise summary of your vows.
- B. Your marriage will benefit dramatically from a simple exercise designed to help both partners **clarify and articulate promises.**

Here is a sample of what Gail and I came up with after looking over our original ceremony and thinking about the basic, most important needs that we each share.

**I PROMISE...**  
**(A renewal of our vows from Brent to Gail)**

I promise I will do everything in my power to help you get to heaven,  
to **accept you**, and to **remain loyal** to you **always**.

I promise to put **you and our marriage second only to God** and to be **open  
and honest with you always** as we strive for **oneness**.

I promise I will **cherish, honor, and support you in good times and bad**  
and strive to love you **selflessly, like Christ loves the church**, as I  
meet your **deepest needs**.

I promise to **pilot, provide, and protect** you and our family and to do these things  
**unconditionally until death do us part...so help me God!!**

**I PROMISE...**  
**(A renewal of vows from Gail to Brent)**

I promise I will do everything in my power to help you get to heaven,  
to **accept you**, and to **remain loyal** to you **always**.

I promise to put **you and our marriage second only to God** and to be **open  
and honest with you always** as we strive for **oneness**.

I promise to **admire, honor, and obey you in good times and bad**  
and strive to be an excellent **keeper at home** and be **sensitive to your deepest needs**.

I promise to **love you** and to do all these things  
**unconditionally until death do us part...so help me God!!**

(Based on the fact that God has provided us with role-based relationships, I suggest you have different vows which focus in on each role. For help look at the handout of scriptures I have provided for you entitled "The Most Important Words about Husband and Wife.")

# Refreshing and Re-instilling Marital Commitment

(Commitment and Vows in Marriage)

## WORKSHOP WORKSHEET:

### STEPS TO RECONSTRUCT AND REFRESH YOUR VOWS

(Your marriage will benefit dramatically from this simple exercise designed to help both of you clarify and articulate the promises you have made to each other.)

1. What do you remember most about your wedding vows from memory? Quickly brainstorm together on a separate sheet of paper and see what you can piece together.
2. What vows have you heard said by others that you liked? Reflect upon what you have come to understand as vitally important to you and your marriage since your wedding day that could be added to a new, updated set of vows that you decide to commit to each other. Brainstorm together. Ask your mate for ideas as to what is important to him or her.
3. Look over the 6 parts listed on the handout for the traditional marriage vows and use this as a guide to help you reconstruct your vows. Can you put them in your own words that will have special meaning to you?
4. Given the different roles that God gives the man and the woman in marriage, look over the handout "The Most Important Words about Husband and Wife". Select from the scriptures some key concepts that reflect your unique roles that God would have you to commit to each other.
5. Condense all this into a brief list that you can both memorize and say to each other on a regular basis!! Periodic rewrites of the commitment statement will make it stronger and more meaningful.

### **Congratulations--you have done it!**

Now write it out on a card, commit it to memory, and say it to each other regularly. You will crave and enjoy hearing your mate talk about the special kind of love you both share as you repeat your promises to each other. And let the kids overhear you say it or say it in front of them--it will teach them valuable lessons about marriage!!

## The Most Important Words About Husband & Wife

*“As therefore God’s picked representatives, purified and beloved, put on that nature which is **merciful** in action, **kindly** in heart, **humble** in mind. Accept life, and be most **patient** and **tolerant** with one another, always ready to **forgive** if you have a difference with anyone. Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven **you**. And, above everything else, **be truly loving**, for love binds all the virtues together in perfection. **Let the peace of Christ guide all your decisions**, for you were called to live as one, united body; and always **be thankful**. **Let the full richness of Christ’s teaching find a home among you...***

~ Colossians 3:12-16a (Phillips)

*“Let all bitterness and indignation and wrath [passion, rage, bad temper] and resentment [anger, animosity] and quarreling [brawling, clamor, contention] and slander [evil speaking, abusive, and blasphemous language] be banished from you, with all malice [spite, ill-will, or baseness of any kind].*

~ Ephesians 4:31 (Amplified)

*“Wherefore, **accept one another**, just as **Christ** also accepted **us** to the glory of God.”*

~ Romans 15:7 (New American Standard)

*“**Be subject to one another** [“fit in with” each other] out of reverence for **Christ**...You **WIVES** must learn to adapt yourselves to your husbands, as you submit yourselves to the **Lord**, for the husband is the head of the wife in the **same way** that **Christ** is the head of the church and savior to the body. The willing subjection of the church to **Christ** should be reproduced in the submission of wives to their husbands in everything.”*

~ Ephesians 5:21 (Amplified)

*“In a similar way you wives should be submissive to your own husbands, so that if any of them will **not** be persuaded by the **message**, they may without message be won over by the **conduct** of their wives, as they observe your **chaste** and **respectful** behavior.”*

~ 1 Peter 3:1,2 (New Berkeley)

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*“...Let the wife see that she **respects** and **reverences** her husband, that she **notices** him, **regards** him, **honors** him, **prefers** him, **venerates** him and **esteems** him; and that she **defers to him**, **praises** him, and **loves** and **admires** him exceedingly.*

~ Ephesians 5:33 (Amplified)

*“For this cause a man shall **leave** his father and his mother, and shall **cleave** to his wife; and they shall become **one** flesh.”*

~ Gen. 2:24 (New American Standard)

*“Consequently they are no longer **two**, but **one** flesh. What therefore **God** has joined together, **let no man separate.**”*

~ Matthew 19:6 (New American Standard)

*“**Take heed** then, to your spirit, and **let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth.** For I **hate** divorce, says the Lord...”*

~ Malachi 2:15b, 16a (New American Standard)

*“The **HUSBAND** must give his wife the **same sort of love** that **Christ** gave to the church, when **He sacrificed Himself for her**...So men ought to give their wives the love they naturally have for their **own bodies**. The love a man gives his wife is the extending of his love for **himself** to enfold **her**. Nobody ever hated his own body; he **feeds** it and **looks after** it.”*

~ Ephesians 5:25,28-29a (Phillips)

*“...Let each man of you [without exception] **love** his wife [as being in a sense] his **very own** self.”*

~ Ephesians 5:33a (Amplified)

*“Husbands, **love** your wives - be **affectionate** and **sympathetic** with them - and do **not be harsh** or **bitter** or **resentful** toward them.”*

~ Colossians 3:19 (Amplified)

*“...You husbands need to live **understandingly** with your wives as with a **weaker** vessel, rendering them honor as **joint** heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your **praying** may not be **hindered.**”*

~ 1 Peter 3:7 (New Berkeley)

*"Do two walk **together**, except they...have **agreed**?"*

- Amos 3:3 (Amplified)

*"**Two are better than one** because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up."*

~ Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (New American Standard)

*"So let us then definitely aim for and eagerly pursue what makes for **harmony** and for **mutual upbuilding** [edification and development] of one another."*

~ Romans 14:19 (Amplified)

*"...Being of the **same** mind, maintaining the **same love, united**, intent on **one** purpose. Do nothing from **selfishness** or **empty conceit**, but with **humility of mind** let each of you **regard the other as more important than himself**; do not merely look out for your **own** personal interests, but also for the interests of **others**."*

~ Philippians 2:2-4 (New American Standard)

*"Love **endures long** and is **patient** and **kind**; love **never** is **envious** nor boils over with **jealousy**; it is **not boastful** or **vainglorious**, does not display itself **haughtily**. It is **not conceited**, arrogant and inflated with pride; it is **not rude** [unmannerly], and **does not act unbecomingly**. Love [God's love in us] does **not** insist on its **own rights** or its own way, for it is not self-seeking. It is not touchy or fretful or resentful; it **takes no account of the evil done to it** - pays no attention to a suffered wrong. It does not rejoice at injustice and unrighteousness, but rejoices when right and truth prevail. Love **bears up under anything and everything** that comes, is **ever ready to believe the best of every person**, its hopes are fadeless under **all** circumstances, and it **endures everything** [without weakening]. **Love never fails** - never fades out or becomes obsolete or comes to an end... And so faith, hope, love abide; [faith, conviction, and belief respecting man's relation to God and divine things; hope, joyful and confident expectation or eternal salvation; love, true affection for God and man, growing out of God's love for us and in us], these three, but the **greatest of these is love**.*

~ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13 (Amplified)

*"Whether, then, you eat or drink or **whatever you do**, do **all** to the glory of God."*