



Dialectics of Marriage: Commitment as Solution

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Two countervailing trends in the definition of marriage reflect the past and future of the institution. *Covenant marriage* refers to a traditional marital union between man and woman intended to be lifelong or even eternal. The covenant marriage movement arose in the late 1990s out of widespread concern for no-fault divorces and erosion of the traditional or religious institution of marriage (Sanchez, Nock, Wright, & Gager, 2002). *Gay marriage* could be considered the antithesis of traditional marriage in that the union reflects the interests of persons of the same gender who wish to enjoy the rights and responsibilities of one of the most important institutions in society. At first glance, covenant marriage and gay marriage appear to be irreconcilable opposites. However, the dialectics in the *revisoning* of marriage actually point toward a synthesis in which commitment is the solution to the problem of marital decline. Marriage and family counselors should emphasize the value of commitment in making meaning from marriage.

Marriage Is a Covenant: Covenant Marriage

Three states (Louisiana, Arkansas, and Arizona) have adopted a two-tiered system of marriage in which the license is extended beyond the standard civil contract of marriage to include heightened requirements aimed at establishing the permanence of the pair-bond (Brown, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2006; Musselman, 2009; Sanchez et al., 2002). The stringent requirements for covenant marriage include premarital counseling, mandatory counseling in times of conflict, limitations on divorce, delay in dissolution, and proof of fault. The

covenant marriage begins with full disclosure between partners and

acknowledgement by affidavit that marriage is lifelong. The covenant marriage is established to reduce the self interests of individual spouses and to cultivate awareness that the institution requires a covenant with God. Religious persons are especially attracted to the ideal of covenant marriage (Baker, Sanchez, Nock & Wright, 2009; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008).

The hallmark of the covenant marriage is focusing the couple on fulfillment of a sacred promise external to the simple civil contract between two individuals. Chapman (2003, p. 24) observed "...contracts may be a healthy part of a covenant marriage, but contracts alone do not provide a covenant marriage." Characteristics of covenant marriage can be compared and contrasted with contract marriages. Covenant marriage surpasses the time-limited view of contingent consequences by emphasizing aspirations of permanence in mate selection, steadfast love, forgiveness, and unconditional promise of fidelity.

A final distinguishing feature of a covenant marriage is adherence to stereotypical gender roles. Evangelical or fundamentalist Christian principles call on the husband to be the head of the family and the wife to submit to her husband's leadership. As the head of the family, the husband possesses more authority in decisions because he is responsible for the physical, spiritual, and emotional health of his family (Baker et al., 2009). The gender-typed obligations are seen as Biblical guidance for strengthening the stability of the family (Sanchez et al., 2002). Covenant couples overcome the contemporary stigma of gender subordination by advocating it as a service to God and a symbolic means to integrate their own personal desires to make their marriage work as a gendered team (Baker et al., 2009). The emphasis upon traditional heterosexual gender roles places covenant marriage in opposition to another trend in society: emergence of gay marriage.

Marriage Is a Human Right: Gay Marriage

Marital unions formed by gay and lesbian persons call into question the legitimacy of traditional gender roles and the resulting legal restrictions placed on marriage in most states. Indeed, the Federal government even felt compelled to define restrictively the institution in the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. Gay marriage appears to run contrary to a common sense view of a sanctified, heterosexual union. Yet, gay marriage may present a foundation for rescuing marriage from co-habitation and divorce, ensuring the viability of the institution in the future.

The quest for gay marriage has increased substantially since

Table 1: *Characteristics of Contract and Covenant Marriage*

Contract Marriage	Covenant Marriage
Contracts are most often made for a limited period of time.	Covenant relationships view commitments as permanent.
Contracts most often deal with specific actions.	Covenant relationships are based on steadfast love.
Contracts are based on "If..., Then..." mentality.	Covenant relationships require confrontation and forgiveness.
Contracts are motivated by a desire to get something we want.	Covenants are initiated for the benefit of the other person.
Contracts are sometime unspoken and implicit.	In covenant relationships, people make unconditional promises.

Note: Adapted from *Covenant Marriage* by G. Chapman, 2003, pp. 6-24.

the movement began in the 1990s. Currently, proponents of gay marriage view the institution as an opportunity for demonstrating commitment to universal human rights, securing legal rights and privileges (e.g., joint financial advantages and decision-making about health care decisions), gaining social recognition of gay relationships, and *depathologizing* or *normalizing* homosexualities (Kandaswamy, 2008). Although same-sex marriage presents a number of legal and practical ramifications, the issue may ultimately relate to essential American values. The federal case challenging Proposition 8, the California ballot initiative that outlawed same-sex marriage, highlights the *culture wars* attempting to define and regulate marriage.

A lifelong Republican and conservative who headed the Office of Legal Counsel under President Ronald Reagan will argue (at the time of this writing) on behalf of two gay couples to overturn California's ban on gay marriage. The man who argued

Bush v. Gore has taken on *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* as a matter of conscience and a recognition of the value of gay marriage. In an articulate analysis of why same-sex marriage is an American value, Theodore B. Olson (2010) offered the following observations.

...same-sex unions promote the values conservatives prize. Marriage is one of the basic building blocks of our neighborhoods and our nation. At its best, it is a stable bond between two individuals who work to create a loving household and a social and economic partnership. We encourage couples to marry because the commitments they make to one another provide benefits not only to themselves but also to their families and communities. Marriage requires thinking beyond one's own needs. It transforms two individuals into a union based on shared observations, and in doing so establishes a formal investment in the well-being of society. (p. 48)

While widespread acceptance of gay marriage would represent the culmination of the nation's commitment to equal rights for all, it resonates with some conservatives precisely because it upholds the values of family and community. In this respect, the transformative power of gay marriage sounds curiously similar to the ideal of covenant marriage espoused by other conservatives.

Commitment Is the Solution

Marriage is a socio-political institution, rooted in patriarchy and religion and originally connected to property and parenting rights. The meanings of marriage have proliferated over time to include such concepts as love, intimacy, and partnership (Yip, 2004). The nation is in a heated debate over contemporary marriage, which may have been stimulated by declines in the institution due to freedom of relational choice implicit in divorce and co-habitation. Some commentators favor a return to traditional and religious views of marriage based on gendered roles for husbands and wives. Others see changes in marriage as an opportunity to embrace human rights as expressed in dignified same-sex marital unions. The divergent perspectives may find common ground in a shared valuing process in which commitment and devotion define marriage. Covenant marriage and gay marriage agree on the importance of commitment in symbol and practice.

The experiences of Christians who explore same-sex marriage are especially enlightening. Yip (2004) described the varieties of perspectives on marriage among lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians. Similarly, Yarhouse and Nowacki (2007) explored the diverse meanings of marriage among gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) individuals. There is no acceptable monolithic view on marriage. Rather, we seek to find common ground in understanding the importance of commitment to marriage. The following narrative illustrates the point.

Marriage is about making a relationship work, about making a commitment in front of people and god. That's what I would like to do with my relationship. So marriage is a symbol of that commitment. It should transcend the relationship type, whether it's heterosexual or homosexual (John, a gay man in his 30s, living in the United Kingdom; Yip, 2004, p. 177).

Depth of commitment in the lived experiences of partners who choose marriage is the common ground for making meaning out

of marriage. Such a marriage can incorporate the best elements in the marital tradition while seeking to avoid the worst. According to the proposed synthesis, marriage becomes a covenant between two people (in the eyes of God among the religious), a sacrament of love and communal partnership dedicated to enduring hardships and realizing promises for the sake of our collective future. Devotion and dedication replace divorce in the exercise of free choice.

Marriage and family counselors can contribute to the future of stable marriage by embracing the value of commitment. Yarhouse and Nowacki (2007, pp. 43-44) offered advice for exploring the meanings of marriage with others.

1. Avoid caricatures of stakeholders.
2. Recognize and respect diversity in its many forms
3. Understand what is being asked of stakeholders.
4. Improve the quality of research and theory on marriage.
5. Facilitate idiographic (e.g., unique individual) approaches to clinical service delivery.

Between covenant marriage and gay marriage there is common ground for the exploration of lived experiences and shared meanings: commitment.

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