

Your Right to Know: Covenant Theology

The most basic framework of God's relationship with man is the covenant. The first was God's covenant with Noah and every living creature—"never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11). The second covenant was with Abram (Gen 15:18) and then renewed when his name was changed to Abraham (Gen 17:9-14). The third covenant was with Moses and was sealed with the blood of the oxen that had been sacrificed as Moses said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words," and the people committed themselves to living by the Covenant (Ex 24:8). The final covenant of the Old Covenant was made with David, the promise of God that a son of David would establish an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam 7:12-13). Finally, the work of the Old Covenant was completed and the Lord Jesus, the Son of David, established the New Covenant as He gave himself up for us. "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).

A covenant is a promise that cannot be broken and it covers everything. A contract stipulates only certain things on which the parties agree and generally will also state the conditions under which the parties agree to void the contract. In the first two covenants, God makes unilateral promises. In the covenant with David, he also promises to punish those descendant kings who violate the covenant, and the sorry record of the king-sons of David is so bad that only two or three of them receive favorable comment by the authors of the Old Testament books. But the promise held.

Marriage is also a covenant. When Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees about marriage and divorce, he surprised his questioners. The Jews of that time took it for granted that a man could divorce his wife and remarry. The dispute among them was whether a man needed a serious reason (e.g., adultery), or "for any cause" (e.g., being a lousy cook) as the question was phrased in Matthew 19:3. Jesus asked them what they had from Moses, and they replied, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to put her away." (This proof of divorce at least protected a woman from being treated like a yo-yo.) But Jesus replied, "For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:2-9).

In brief, the men of his time wanted to treat marriage as a contract, but Jesus went back to the very order of creation and taught that marriage is a covenant, something that covers everything and lasts until death separates the spouses.

The rainbow was the sign of the covenant with Noah. Beginning with the covenant with Abraham, the sign of the Old Covenant was circumcision of the men. **Beginning with Jesus, the sign of the New Covenant is his own Body and Blood in the Eucharist.** Each Mass provides us with the opportunity to renew this covenant with the Lord. As St Paul wrote; "...The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when

he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:23-26).

In marriage, the sign of the covenant is the marriage act, the sexual union of male husband and female wife. This is a God-given act that by its very nature is oriented toward the co-creation of children and the bonding of the spouses. *The marriage act is intended by God to be a renewal of the marriage covenant.*

But the renewal of the covenant is not automatic. St. Paul warns us that we can sin by defrauding the New Covenant. "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor 11: 27-29). This is why the Church teaches that if you are conscious of having committed a mortal sin, you need to repent and receive the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion.

What makes the marriage act morally different from the same physical act between two people who are not married? It's the same anatomical act, but there is a world of difference. Sacred Scripture and Tradition describe as seriously immoral all those sexual acts that do not occur within marriage. In other words, in God's plan, sexual intercourse is intended to be *exclusively* a marriage act, and within marriage those acts ought to be at least implicitly an *authentic* renewal of the marriage covenant, that is, at least not contradicting it in any way.

It sometimes helps to remember just what a man and woman do when they "commit marriage." They promise to love each other, and that entails caring love, not just romantic love. They promise to be faithful to each other. They vow to love and be faithful for better and for worse, knowing full well that there will be difficult times as well as the best of times. And they vow to keep this commitment until death do they part.

Wow! How can those who recognize their own weaknesses and sins write such a blank check to the other person before God? Millions do so every year because they believe that this is God's plan for love and sexuality and that He will provide all the graces they need to persevere through whatever marital difficulties they will encounter.

The marriage act can also be defrauded, and in more ways than one. There is such a thing as marital rape, and that is certainly not a renewal of the marriage covenant.

If you keep in mind that the marriage act ought to be a renewal of the commitment, the caring love, and the for-better-and-for worse of the marriage covenant, then it is not difficult to see that contraception is not a renewal of the marriage covenant. Marital contraception says, "I take you for better but positively **not** for the imagined worse of

possible pregnancy.” It contradicts the “for better and for worse” of the marriage covenant. It pretends to be what it isn’t. It is dishonest and therefore immoral.

The concept is simple: Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant. What I have tried to do in this article is to place that concept in the context of the Commandments, the biblical covenant, and marriage itself.

For more on the analogy between the Eucharistic and marital communions, see <http://www.nfpandmore.org/Holy%20Communion%20-%20Eucharistic%20and%20Marital.pdf> .

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