



A Rhythm Church Perspective: Is Marriage Still Relevant for Today?

Marriage, established by God at creation, represents a divine covenant rather than merely a human institution. The biblical foundation in Genesis 2:24 states:

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

This declaration establishes marriage as a divinely ordained covenant relationship—one that Jesus Christ himself reaffirmed in Matthew 19:4-6, emphasizing its permanent nature when he stated, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” The theological significance of marriage cannot be overstated: it stands as an earthly reflection of Christ’s relationship with His Church (Ephesians 5:21-33), demonstrating sacrificial love, mutual submission, and unbreakable commitment.

THE COVENANT NATURE OF MARRIAGE

From a theological perspective, marriage must be understood as covenant rather than contract. While contracts are conditional arrangements based on mutual benefit, covenants are sacred bonds that persist regardless of circumstances. As Shane

Willard notes in his Hebraic understanding of marriage, the ancient Jewish conception viewed marriage not as ownership but as an agreement of mutual responsibility and commitment.^[^1]

This covenant understanding reflects God’s own relationship with His people throughout Scripture. Just as God maintained His covenant with Israel despite their unfaithfulness (Hosea 2:19-20), marriage represents a sacred bond that transcends transactional thinking. The theological position on marriage must maintain this distinction between covenant and contract to preserve its divine significance.

GRACE AS THE CENTRE OF MARRIAGE

The doctrine of grace forms the theological foundation for Christian marriage. Grace—God’s unmerited favor toward humanity—provides the paradigm for how spouses relate to one another. The exhortation in Colossians 3:12-14 establishes this framework:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive

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as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

This passage reveals that marriage, properly understood, operates not on principles of merit or perfection but on continual forgiveness, patience, and sacrificial love—the very attributes God demonstrates toward His people. A theological understanding of marriage must emphasize that grace is not peripheral but central to the marital covenant.^[^2]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE

N.T. Wright's theological contribution helps us understand marriage not merely as a present social arrangement but as part of God's eschatological purpose. In his work **Surprised by Hope**, Wright establishes that marriage serves as a signpost of the coming Kingdom of God—a microcosm of the ultimate restoration and reconciliation God intends for all creation.^[^3]

This eschatological dimension means that Christian marriage is not merely a private arrangement but participation in God's redemptive work. When two believers commit themselves in marriage, they engage in kingdom work that anticipates the final marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7–9). Their union becomes a prophetic witness to God's ultimate reconciliation with humanity.

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO CULTURAL SHIFTS

Current cultural trends have challenged the traditional understanding of marriage through alternatives such as cohabitation, temporary partnerships, and relationships defined primarily by personal fulfillment. A theological position must address these shifts not merely as sociological phenomena but as departures from divine design.

Dr. James Dobson's research affirms that these departures have measurable consequences for individuals, children, and society—observations that align with the biblical principle that God's designs are for human flourishing.^[^4] The theological position

maintains that divine patterns for human relationships are not arbitrary restrictions but loving provisions for human wellbeing and spiritual development.

A GRACE-CENTERED APPROACH FOR COHABITING COUPLES

For couples who are living together without the covenant of marriage—particularly those who come to faith and recognize the biblical design for marriage—a grace-centered theological approach is essential. The path forward must be guided neither by legalism nor by moral relativism, but by the transformative power of grace that both forgives and calls to righteousness.

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES FOR MINISTRY TO COHABITING COUPLES

1. Primacy of Grace – The starting point must always be the recognition that all stand in need of God's grace (Romans 3:23–24). The Church's first response should be to welcome such couples into community without condemnation, while still maintaining the biblical ideal of marriage.

2. Progressive Sanctification – Theological understanding recognizes that spiritual growth occurs as a process (2 Peter 3:18). While the biblical standard remains clear, patience with the journey toward full alignment with God's design reflects Christ's own patient work in believers' lives.

3. Pastoral Wisdom – Each situation requires discernment rather than formulaic responses. Factors such as children, financial circumstances, and spiritual maturity will influence the appropriate pastoral counsel in each case.

4. Transformational Intent – The goal is not merely behavioral conformity but heart transformation that leads to embracing God's design. This approach follows Paul's example of meeting people where they are while calling them toward God's best (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

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PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR COHABITING COUPLES

For couples who come to faith while cohabiting, the grace-centered theological response offers clear direction without harsh condemnation. The Church should:

1. Affirm the beauty and purpose of marriage as God's design
2. Provide premarital counseling that addresses both theological understanding and practical relationship skills
3. Offer practical support that may remove obstacles to marriage (financial assistance, community celebration)
4. Create a pathway to marriage that emphasizes covenant commitment rather than focusing solely on past choices

This approach recognizes that God meets people where they are but loves them too much to leave them there. The same grace that offers forgiveness also empowers transformation, guiding believers toward alignment with God's designs for human flourishing.^[^5]

THE TRANSFORMATIVE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

Theologically, marriage serves not merely reproductive or social functions but transformative purposes in believers' lives. Ephesians 5:25-27 reveals this sanctifying intention:

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

This passage establishes that marriage, like other divine institutions, serves as a context for spiritual formation—a relationship in which believers learn to embody Christlike love, sacrifice, and holiness. Marriage therefore remains relevant not merely as a social custom but as a divinely appointed means of sanctification and spiritual growth.^[^6]

THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS REGARDING MARRIAGE

From a grace-centered theological perspective, we affirm:

1. The Divine Origin of Marriage – Marriage was established by God at creation as a covenant union between man and woman, reflecting His creative purposes and relational nature.

2. The Christological Pattern – Christian marriage follows the model of Christ and the Church, characterized by sacrificial love, mutual submission, and enduring commitment rather than convenience or temporary fulfillment.

3. The Covenant Foundation – Marriage stands as a covenant relationship rather than a contractual arrangement, distinguished by unconditional commitment that persists through changing circumstances.

4. The Grace Imperative – Marriage functions properly only when grace—the same unmerited favor God extends to believers—governs the relationship, allowing for forgiveness, growth, and reconciliation.

5. The Eschatological Witness – Marriage serves as a living testimony to God's ultimate plan for reconciliation and communion with His people, participating in and pointing toward His redemptive work in the world.

6. The Sanctifying Purpose – Marriage is designed as a context for spiritual formation and character development, where believers learn to embody the fruit of the Spirit in daily relationship.

THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION

The theological position on marriage maintains its enduring relevance precisely because its foundation transcends cultural trends and societal shifts. As an institution established by God, patterned after Christ's relationship with the Church, and sustained by grace, marriage continues to serve divine purposes in human lives and communities.

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The question of relevance must ultimately be answered not by cultural acceptance but by theological fidelity. Marriage remains relevant not because it adapts to changing human preferences but because it reflects unchanging divine truths about covenant, sacrifice, and redemptive love. When understood and practiced according to biblical principles centered on grace, marriage continues to function as God intended—as a sacred covenant that glorifies Him, sanctifies believers, strengthens families, and witnesses to His redemptive plan for humanity.

In an age of impermanence, biblical marriage stands as a testament to the God who makes and keeps His promises, offering not just an alternative lifestyle but a theological declaration about the nature of love itself.^[^7]

RECOMMENDED READING FOR BUILDING A HEALTHY MARRIAGE

^[^1]: Willard, Shane. **Marriage from a Grace Perspective***. This work explores the Hebraic understanding of covenant and its application to modern marriages.

^[^2]: Chapman, Gary. **The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts**. A practical guide to understanding how to express and receive love effectively in marriage.

^[^3]: Wright, N.T. **Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church**. While not exclusively about marriage, this work provides theological framework for understanding marriage in the context of God's kingdom.

^[^4]: Dobson, James. **Love for a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Will Go the Distance**. Offers practical wisdom for maintaining commitment through the challenges of married life.

^[^5]: Keller, Timothy and Kathy Keller. **The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God**. A theological exploration of marriage that addresses both its challenges

and its beauty.

^[^6]: Thomas, Gary. ***Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*** Explores the sanctifying purpose of marriage in believers' lives.

^[^7]: Parrott, Les and Leslie. ***Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before and After You Marry***. A practical guide for preparing for marriage or strengthening existing marriages.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

– Cloud, Henry and John Townsend. **Boundaries in Marriage**. Explores the importance of healthy boundaries in creating a thriving marriage.

– Gottman, John. **The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work**. Research-based principles for building lasting relationships, compatible with biblical principles.

– Eggerichs, Emerson. **Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs**. Explores the biblical concept of mutual submission and honor in marriage.