

Keeping Covenant: In Marriage and the Body of Christ

Jer. 33:19-22, Is. 54:5-10, Eph. 5:28-33

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Introduction: Forty-four years ago this past week Susie and I tied the knot on our marriage ... or actually God tied it (“what God has joined together let not man put asunder”). How gracious our Lord has been to help us over all the hurdles; with what grace He has taught us about communication on all the different levels (remember the iceberg); what grace to carry us through all the storms! We live in a day when marriage and family are being attacked more viciously and viscerally than ever before. Who would have ever believed that in Western culture it would someday be old-fashioned – even looked down upon! – to get married and raise a family?! But such are the tactics of the enemy, who’s been preparing the terrain for such disaster for centuries!

When Gallup first measured LGBTQ+ identification in the U.S. (2012), only 3.5% of the interviewees claimed a non-straight label. By 2020, the percentage of those who identified as such was up to 5.6%. That jumped to 7.1% in 2021 and has continued to climb since then –up to 7.6% in 2023. But among Gen Z (birth years mid-to-late 1990’s through early 2010’s), more than 1 in 5 (22.3%) now identify with some angle of the LGBTQ+ spectrum. And why is this generation so vulnerable to the ideological bombardment that’s taken place over the last decade? They’re the first generation to grow up with access to the Internet and portable digital technology from a young age, hence also being educated in the new ideology; curiously, there is also a higher prevalence of mental health conditions among Gen Z! Greater instability on questions of identity, selfhood, right and wrong, life purpose, etc. “Does life have intrinsic meaning? Or do we have to come up with our own?” Spanish poet Antonio Machado put it this way in 1912: *“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar”* (“Wayfarer, there is no path, you make the path as you go”). Jesus, on the other hand, said in no uncertain terms, *“I am the Way.”* You can’t have that both ways.

What is the church saying and doing to address the issues of this generation? Do these statistics represent progress or deterioration? Some would say the former: we’re getting people’s real feelings out on the table. OK, but also people are being “reeducated” (indoctrinated) under the new prevailing philosophy, which so contradicts God’s Word. Gay Pride week in Spain has not really been about vindication of diversity and inclusion, but about a particular political viewpoint that excludes, denigrates, and demonizes other viewpoints! God’s Word is our standard of truth (if Jesus is the Way, I cannot deviate from that without getting lost!). It’s also the standard for mental and sexual health that we as followers of Jesus adhere to. So is the church not going to love “non-straight” people? Heaven forbid that we should ever give that kind of message! This is not about whom we will love and whom we won’t love (Scripture is our standard for love). As Christians we must determine to respect every person’s chosen identity, even if we disagree with it, because this is God’s approach to His image in

us. But God not only *loves* every human being; He also longs for our *redemption!* And **this generation no longer believes in the need for redemption:** “we’re all good just like we are!” But the *statistics are screaming otherwise!* It’s a lie! We are NOT OK; we’re a seriously deteriorating and wounded society, and our abandonment of God’s Word (as our authority) has everything to do with it. Will we wake up before it’s too late? Will we as the Body of Christ stand against the current even when it’s so unpopular ...?

What diagnosis and solution does God’s Word offer? In Jer. 33:3, sometimes referred to as God’s phone number, the Lord says, **“Call to me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”** But we often stop there and fail to see the context of those great and hidden things! Specifically, it’s disaster: the destruction of Jerusalem, to be filled with dead bodies because of all the evil they were committing. The Chaldeans were going to be the hand of God bringing about justice: **the reaping of all that Judah had been sowing!** This will also be the pattern in our own generation – our culture is sowing the wind and will reap the whirlwind (Hosea). 20th-century statistician and philosopher W. Edwards Deming wrote that *“every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets.”* So our culture is perfectly designed to achieve the results that we’re getting out of it: decline, crisis of education, crisis of leadership, divisions, crumbling foundations, etc. But in the midst of all the futility and vanity in Israel, that was precisely when God promised the great and hidden things: the healing, restoration (of captives!), the cleansing from guilt, forgiveness of sin and rebellion (rescue from the self-serving systems humanity has created). Salvation from our miserable condition: these are the great, hidden things! It takes faith and vision that comes from the Gospel to perceive what amazing new thing could be made from an old outdated building or a broken life!

In the rest of Jer. 33, God explains that the great and hidden things are all based on His covenant! The Hebrew word *berith* comes from a root meaning to cut, which was a reference to the **sacrifices** that normally accompanied the covenant-making (this was a life and death matter); there were also signs or symbols exchanged, with witnesses, a shared meal, sometimes a memorial; solemn binding oaths would seal the relationship with promises of blessing for keeping the covenant and curses for breaking it; sometimes there would be a written document on which the terms of the covenant were spelled out in the form of promises and stipulations, then witnessed to, signed and sealed. The majority of the OT uses of *berith* are translated into Greek by the word *diatheke*, a common technical word used in Greco-Roman law to describe the settlement of an inheritance (last will and testament), i.e., a will that distributes one’s property after death according to the owner’s wishes; it was completely unilateral, an act of grace! (NT use: to describe the “self-commitment, promises, and conditions by which God entered into relationship with humanity.”)

God is the One who came up with the notion of “covenant,” because it’s what characterizes His inner being: grace, love, goodness, faithfulness in relationship. So He made covenants with different individuals (formal agreement or promise between two or more parties establishing a bond between them and the terms of their mutual relationship): for instance, with Noah, Abraham, and David, but especially with the people of Israel (through the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant). He was **seeking to teach them covenant faithfulness and grace** (His standard of love and justice)! When we look at this OT background of covenant, we see this is what forms the basis for talking about **marriage as a sacred covenant**, first between God and Israel (Is. 54:5-10); then the parallels become obvious between the OT and NT emphases, so that later it’s the marriage of God’s Son and His Bride, the church.

Only faith in Jesus brings us into that covenant relationship with God, because **Jesus is the only human who ever kept covenant perfectly** with God, all through His life, and especially at the cross. As He endured our rebellious onslaught (the maximum expression of sin) all the way to death, He was incarnating God’s forgiveness, sealing His love for us with His own blood (the maximum expression of grace!), completing the establishment of His Kingdom in human flesh and the New Covenant in human history. This means we learn to keep covenant (on all levels) only through the power of Jesus’ Spirit. And what does it look like practically for us to “keep covenant”? In both marriage and the Body of Christ,

we want to look at a threefold commitment that will characterize the inner workings of a faithful covenant relationship:

1) Building each other up in love (a principle that Paul emphasizes in 1 Thes. 5:11, Eph. 4:16; Jesus in Jn. 13:34-35): this is fundamental in a marriage relationship, the basic mentality necessary under all circumstances. Nothing has been more painful to me in ministry than to watch marriages deteriorate and fall apart, especially if it was a couple that I had counseled and married! A piece of my heart was crushed (especially where children were involved). When it was one of my own sons that went through such a breakup, it nearly sank my ship. But sometimes it gets really hard to build the other up when you are so torn down inside, and there doesn't seem to be any good will from the other for building up. Scripture doesn't give anyone an automatic thumbs up for throwing in the towel, but Scripture does give guidelines when it comes to things like abusive behaviors and unfaithfulness. What's necessary is that from the beginning both partners agree to work toward a common culture of mutual edification (and of course, it's no guarantee against failure). And this same mentality is fundamental in the Body of Christ! Learning together from the Lord and learning from one another.

2) Iron sharpening iron (Prov. 27:17). This really sounds like a battle, doesn't it? Conflict, differences, trials, dissatisfaction, rough edges – yes, in fact, the Lord uses difficulties like a file to wear down our sharp edges and corners! And He uses us the same way with each other, whether in marriage or in the Body of Christ! Think of Jesus' disciples and how often they were arguing among themselves. But we have no reason to look down on them! Jesus had called every one of them by name, inviting them to follow Him! Yet they had trouble getting along, they were terribly competitive, jealous, envious. But Jesus knew they were iron sharpening iron, which meant that sometimes sparks would fly, but the result would be sharper, more effective instruments. And He knows that's how it should be in a marriage: you can't live in such intimacy with another human being without getting under each other's skin now and then, without opening some issues from some earlier point in life, without challenging someone's favorite prejudice or superstition. My wife has made me a better theologian, teacher, and husband simply by questioning something I say, making me explain myself better, or sharing her insights into the biblical text. Husbands and wives should study the Bible together, not to see who knows more, but to share their thoughts and grow together! So it is in the church today: the battle is not against flesh/blood (Eph. 6:12)! We're in a spiritual conflict, so we must disagree without being disagreeable, be different without being indifferent. Contentment is from the Lord, not from anything or person in this world. And it's the same in the Body of Christ.

3) Love covering a multitude of sins (Prov. 10:12, 1 Pt. 4:8): It has to be Christ's love, because ours is inadequate. And this is no "cover-up" (like makeup cover a blemish!); it's about forgiveness! Marriage can't survive without this grace, because we're both sinners (*equally* so, whether we want to confess it that way or not)! This was exactly what God was doing down through Israel's history, culminating in the cross where Jesus was *covering* our sin with His forgiveness, enfleshing God's love for all time and eternity. And our deep conviction is that Jesus wants to work through our marriages to show the covenant faithfulness with which He has redeemed the world! He wants our marriages to become showcases of what our faithful God looks like, illustrating what Christ and His Bride are supposed to look like! Yes, your marriage has a bigger purpose than just your private marital bliss! We as a church have a higher purpose than just feeling good about ourselves because of participating in lovely worship and lively fellowship – we're about covering a multitude of sins with the forgiveness of Christ.