

Survey of Systematic Theology

*“Discuss and distinguish between marriage as a
divine institution and as a civil contract.”*

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Marriage is first and foremost a divine institution as Wiley points out in his section of study regarding Christian Ethics or the Life of Holiness. Wiley makes his case using example from the Genesis account of creation, and I have no argument with his position or the points he uses to substantiate it. There are a number of points that he does not make that I find reinforce his position even more. I will address these points later in this paper, but will make the distinction first between divine institution and civil contract.

As much that marriage is a divine institution; because of the nature of and fall of man, it is also a civil contract. Wiley aptly points out the facts surrounding this classification and reasons for marriage being bound by civil contract. He states a number of reasons for marriage begin recognized by a civil society some of which are listed as follows:

1. A Christian state recognizes marriage as a matter of public morality.
2. Marriage distributes society into families.
3. Marriage takes into account and recognizes property rights.
4. The state recognizes what constitutes a lawful marriage in order to maintain the integrity of the institution thereof.¹

It is my contention that what truly distinguishes the divine institution from the civil contract is the nature and damage that the fall of man introduced to the original design of marriage by God. It is my belief that marriage is a metaphor or analogy for the relationship between Christ and Church. It is also my belief that this was a design foreordained before the creation of Adam or the institution of Marriage. I also contend that it was the free-will and ultimately the fall of man that introduced marriage as a civil contract. I will endeavor to process my understanding in an integrative method <smile>.

The Bride of Christ...what exactly does this phrase mean? Is this phrase meant to be taken literally? Is it meant to be taken figuratively? Is the Bride of Christ *really* a metaphor, or is it something much more that for many of the family of believers has been lost in translation. I believe that the Bible does use the term metaphorically, however in the greater scheme of spiritual truth and understanding; there is a larger sense of

¹ Wiley, H. Orton, *Christian Theology*, Vol. III (Beacon Hill Press) pp.81-82.

literalism that can be construed from the term and the usage that the Bible portrays. In order to set this stage properly in hopes of making any sense with this study, we'll put forth a series of questions and statements of fact that are taken directly from scripture.

First, it was God that ordained the unity of marriage between a man and woman. He did this in the opening account of His Creation and established the ordination of this union very early (Gen 2:18-25). Now, some questions: Why did God establish "marriage" in the way that He did? Why is there so much physical disparity between a man and a woman? What is the purpose of the subordination of woman to man? I submit that this is but the first example of the "real" metaphor...a tangible glimpse of the true relationship of Christ and the Church. We would rather believe this to be our reality...and that God is using metaphors when illustrating the truth to us; however, I see the truth being told to us by way of a divinely orchestrated "scientific method." God knew that at the creation of man he was going to fail in obedience. Before the creation of man a plan was ordained to make provision for this failure (Eph 1:3-13). Okay, okay...I know this is "out there," but follow with me. In order for free-will to work there has to be a provision for failure, so there is...but it is not God's will for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). So, I see from Genesis to Revelation a grand orchestration of God exercising His sovereignty and love over His creation with the gift of choice..."free-will." Loosely stated, it goes something like this:

- **The problem:** Man, the creation, with a free will.
- **The hypothesis:** The creation is subject to wrong choices with free-will and prone to failure by way of disobedience/sin. God and Sin are incompatible, thus there is need for an escape or deliverance from this dilemma. The creation is in need of a savior.
- **Testing the hypothesis:** Establish a control mechanism (a chosen people – Israel). Introduce law to gather and explain data/results/effects resultant from sin. Expose to the creature of free-will the necessity of a savior – this is done by way of the control mechanism (Israel and Law) operating alongside the Gentile ultimately affording an avenue of reconciliation to all of creation.
- **Interpretation and conclusions:** From the inception of creation the created ones of free-will were destined to be the subordinate in marriage to the Savior King. The historical chronicle that was divinely orchestrated before time existed speaks to the creation the truths that were, are and always meant to be.

Man was destined to be "married" to Christ before he was created. Man had absolutely no concept of what this was all about or meant to be, but we see a very strong and recurrent

theme throughout the Old Testament. The truth is explained a little more clearly in the New Testament especially when redeemed man is referenced as the Church; however the Old Testament bears strong witness to this truth as well once light has been shed upon it. Let us examine the case as it appears in the Old Testament.

As has been pointed out, it was God that ordained marriage at creation, and even following the fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden the sanctity of marriage was endorsed by God (Gen 6; Gen 11-12; Gen 29). As the chronicle of God and man continues we begin to see specific instruction relative to marriage and sexual immorality become evident. This begins to be illustrated through the instruction of the Law and the separation of God's "chosen" people, Israel (Ex 20:3; 20:14; Deut 7:3; Lev 20:5; Lev 21:13-14). Continuing our journey through time and the Old Testament, we have example after example of God's displeasure with the unfaithfulness of His Bride (in this case Israel) as she prostitutes herself and commits adultery with other gods and nations. Time and time again God pronounces judgment against His unfaithful bride, but there are also seasons of great joy and letters of love and restoration. Some examples of this great and faithful love can be found in the account of the book of Hosea, another is the splendor of love found in the Song of Solomon. The illustrations that are portrayed in every instance are not metaphorical in their sense, but a graphic representation of the love and relationship that exists in a spiritual real-time with our God...the way that we carry out our life on a physical plane is representative of where our heart exists on the spiritual plane. For this reason, God is incensed with any violation of the sanctity of this relationship with His Bride whether it is the manifest Bride of Israel during the Old Testament or the Bride as the Church told in the New Testament. Our examples are still more clearly defined yet in the Old Testament account, however, we must move on for the sake of brevity...

Jesus used various aspects of marriage and spoke in parables using marriage as a tool to convey his points. He spoke of himself as the bridegroom and referred to his church as his bride on more than one occasion (Matt 9:15; 25:1-10; John 3:29). To truly understand some of the parables and examples that Jesus referred to in his teaching it would behoove

us to understand in a little greater detail what was generally understood amongst those that heard his words. What follows is a brief summary of the Jewish betrothal process:

When a Jewish young man wished to marry a particular young woman, it was customary for the prospective groom's father first to approach the girl's father with the proposal of marriage. The two men would discuss this possible union including the price offered by the groom for the bride. If the girl's father agreed to the suggested amount, the two men sealed the agreement with a toast of wine.

The potential bride then entered the room whereupon the prospective groom proclaimed his love and asked her to be his bride. If the young woman wished to be his wife, she accepted his proposal at this time. The validation of the agreement made by the engaged couple was the presentation of a gift by the groom. He offered it in the presence of at least two witnesses. As he gave the gift, usually a ring, he said to his intended bride, "Behold you are consecrated unto me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

Arrangements were also made right then concerning the terms of the marriage. A written contract listed the time, place, and size of the wedding as well as recording the dowry and terms of maintenance of the marriage. This binding document called a "ketubah" was kept in the bride's possession until the consummation of the marriage. Finally, this first part of a two-part ceremony was concluded by the toast of a glass of wine. The whole ceremony was called the "shiddukhin," or engagement.

The Bible refers to the status of the prospective bride and groom as "espousal" or "betrothal." It meant that the two people were committed to each other as much as a married couple would be. The only parts of the marriage not yet completed were the formal "huppah" (hūp´e) ceremony followed by their physical union. This betrothal was considered so binding that the only way to break it was by an actual bill of divorcement.

[The most distinctive feature of any Jewish wedding is the "*huppah*." This term is taken from the Talmudic stipulation that a marriage does not take legal effect until the bride has entered the "*huppah*." We are all of course familiar with the object being referred to. It is a canopy-like structure consisting of a piece of cloth,

sometimes a *talit*, that is held aloft on four posts, and beneath which the couple stand during the religious wedding ceremony.]²

The groom then departed, but not before he assured his bride with the promises of building a home for her and returning to complete the marriage ceremony. He usually took a year to prepare her new home which often consisted of an addition built onto his own father's house.

The bride was expected to remain true to her groom as she prepared herself and her trousseau. She lived for the day of his return for her which would be heralded by a shout from the members of the wedding party. The impending return of her groom was to influence the bride's behavior during this interim espousal period.

The typical Jewish wedding took place at night. As soon as any members of the wedding spotted the moving torches signaling the groom's approach, their cry echoed through the streets, "The bridegroom is coming." The *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* tells us, "Mirth and gladness announced their approach to townspeople waiting in houses along the route to the bride's house." Upon hearing the announcement, the excited bride would drop everything in order to slip into her wedding dress and complete her final personal preparations for marriage.

Rather than the groom entering the bride's house, the bride came out to meet him. The two, accompanied by their wedding party, returned together to the groom's home for the marriage ceremony. Following the public ceremony, the newlyweds entered their bridal chamber to be intimate with each other for the first time. After this union, the groom came out and announced to the wedding guests, "Our marriage is consummated."

Upon receiving the glad news, the wedding party began a "festive" seven-day celebration. The celebration lasted seven days only if this was the first marriage of a virgin girl. During this time the bride and the groom stayed with each other in seclusion. At the end of this time of privacy, the groom would present his unveiled bride to everyone in attendance. The newlyweds then joined in the wedding feast with the guests.

² S. J. Zevin, ed., *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, vol. 16, Jerusalem, 1980.

The parallels that are pertinent to us as believers are numerous. More important in my own understanding is that in the truest sense of this illustration is that **WE** the children of promise **ARE** the true model for the Jewish betrothal process...not the other way around. You see, **WE** were chosen before the creation of the earth. Through Adam sin entered into the world...the bride-price was agreed upon before this fall. The agreement of the price was settled upon and price would be the life of Jesus. The cup was shared (remember the cup of the new covenant at the last supper) and the price was paid (the Cross) Jesus then returned to prepare the bridal mansion and gifts were given to the bride (Holy Spirit) to show consecration and protect the bride for Him. We hold the covenant in the form of the Bible in our hands today as we wait for our bridegrooms return. Are we living for His return? Are we ready at a moments notice? Any day now the father will give His consent to the bridal mansion and will allow the bridegroom to return for His bride.

(I realize that this paper has exceeded the requirements set forth in the curriculum; it is hard to convey these thoughts without putting forth the information necessary to develop the thought. A couple more points and I'll wrap this up)

The Apostle Paul spends some time touching on this truth in several of his letters to the various churches and gets somewhat specific in his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 5:25-33). Paul calls this truth (Christ and His Bride the Church) a great mystery. It is not a mystery nor a metaphor at this point any longer, but a truth that must be embraced. Jesus is Lord and in accordance with God-breathed and inspired words written by Paul; we are to “submit to our husband, for He is the head of the Church.”

We're told by Jesus himself that no one knows the time of His return except the Father. We should be found Holy and blameless walking consecrated to our one true love. We shouldn't grow weary or complacent...nor should we share our love with another. After all, we've been bought with a price; our lives do not belong to us. Our marriage has been ordained and the covenant has been agreed to. Our groom has departed from us to prepare our bridal mansion. He is soon to return once the Father has agreed to the construction. Chapters 19-21 in the book of Revelation speak of the wedding supper and celebration feast of Christ and his Church and we are told that it will be holy, blameless and spotless

as the bride should be for her groom. I do not want to be found as the foolish virgins...not ready, having grown complacent. He, my groom, loves me. He has told me so. He paid a great price for me and he is now building our bridal mansion...and he's coming soon, for me...for us...His Church; His Bride.

I'll close with a handful of scriptures and a statement; it pleases me to understand and embrace being a member of the Church and the Bride of my Savior, Christ.

Rev 7:15 (ref huppah)

Rev 19:7-8

Rev 21:9

Amen.

Conclusion –

So, is there a distinction between the divine institution and the civil aspect of marriage? Yes. The civil aspect is akin to the ugly reminder of sin relative to God's design. The divine institution can only be realized in truth from what we have come to understand as metaphor in the Holy Scriptures...for now. There will come a time when the divine institution will be fully realized in truth; of this, we are promised.