

Marriage Covenants Are Conditional (**NOT** Unconditional)

By Stephen Gola

What is a Covenant?

The word "covenant" is defined as "a compact" which is an agreement between two or more parties. In our case, we mean a marriage covenant. Within the very meaning of the name "covenant" lies the essential fact that there are conditions to a covenant. A "covenant" is made up of conditions (terms of agreement) which each party has agreed to uphold, otherwise, there is no covenant. Covenants are legal documents or verbal agreements whereby oaths of faithfulness are expressed between two or more parties. A covenant carries legal authority in which all parties are constrained (obligated) by the conditions of the covenant. It is always conditional upon each of the parties involved to fulfill their part of the covenant. There is no such thing as an "unconditional" covenant. "Unconditional" means no conditions or that anything goes. This in itself would negate the very use of the word covenant. However, there is such a thing as a conditional covenant *becoming* a "permanent" covenant after all of the conditions of the covenant have been fulfilled.

Establishing a covenant is different than *fulfilling* a covenant. *Establishing* a covenant is the successful agreement of the parties involved regarding the terms and conditions of the covenant. *Fulfilling* the covenant is the actual carrying-out of that agreement.

Because a covenant depends upon each party fulfilling their agreed-upon part, it carries the legal authority that conditions must be met by all parties or the covenant is broken. When a covenant is broken the covenant *obligations* cease. Unless remedy for reconciliation, restitution or both are agreed-upon, the covenant will be terminated and dissolved. In the case of the marriage covenant when there is a divorce, there is actually an additional covenant which comes into play resulting from the children who are born within the marriage covenant. This additional covenant (the covenant between the children and the parents), continues despite the ended marriage covenant.

God Makes Conditional Covenants

Unconditional marriage covenants did not start with God, but with man by His church teaching (tradition) that a marriage covenant is indissolvable. Even when God first created man in the Garden of Eden, He made a conditional covenant with them. To enable the man and woman to prove their love to Him, God put a tree in the midst of the Garden called: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God's only command to them was for them not to eat of this specific tree. Everything else in the world was theirs; otherwise, they would start dying both spiritually and physically. This was their proof of loyalty and love to God because of the awesome responsibility and authority He had given them over the entire universe. You cannot have true love unless you have the option not to love.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." The keeping of the commandments (the conditions) of the covenant is the way we show God that we love Him. Without the keeping of the commandments of the covenant, there is NO display of commitment (love) to God. We have broken covenant! His justice requires us to either make restitution and/or reconciliation or else we break our relationship totally with God.

God only operates upon truth. Therefore, if it appears that God is not doing His part in our life it is because WE are not fulfilling our part of the covenant. Covenants are conditional.

One of the conditional covenants that God made is one that almost everyone in the world is familiar with, the covenant with the condition of circumcision. In Genesis 17:10, 14 the Lord said to Abraham, "*This is*

My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised." Then in verse 14 the Lord gave Abraham the penalty for not fulfilling the condition of the covenant: *"And the uncircumcised male child, WHO IS NOT CIRCUMCISED in the flesh of his foreskin, that person SHALL BE CUT OFF from his people; HE HAS BROKEN MY COVENANT."*

Another example of God's covenants is the one He made with Israel: *"Now therefore, IF you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, THEN you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine"* (Exodus 19:5). When a covenant has to do with man, a covenant is always conditional if it is to be a covenant. God does not make unconditional or unbreakable covenants with fallible sinful man. However, He does turn a conditional covenant into a permanent covenant when all of the conditions of the covenant have been met. This can be seen in the case of the covenant God made with Abraham. The covenant was actually made with Abraham's Seed to come, Jesus. After Jesus fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the covenant (which included living a sinless life, taking the penalty for man's sins upon Himself in hell, and being rightfully raised from the dead forever incorruptible), God turned it into a permanent covenant. (See Galatians 3:16 and Hebrews 1:8-9).

Because God knows our sinfulness, He does not make unconditional or unbreakable covenants with man. Therefore, who are we as sinful man, to even consider that the covenants we make with each other (in this case, marriage), are indissolvable or unbreakable because of unsurpassing violations by the other party? Covenants are conditional; that is why they are called "covenants" because they contain provisions to protect the party of the agreement who do not violate the covenant.

Marriage Covenants

Unconditional, Defined

The very word "unconditional" means without conditions. In other words, it does not matter how many violations of the marriage covenant that a partner makes, the covenant is still intact. The word "unconditional" is a contradiction of the word "covenant." If a marriage covenant did not have conditions it would be like saying that one partner can abuse the other, or a spouse can have sex or play around with anyone outside of the marriage and always feel welcomed back into a safe, secure and happy relationship. This is too ridiculous to even consider! Nevertheless, this is exactly what has been taught by the church in saying that a marriage is indissolvable! Because it has been taught as truth that "God hates divorce," it is implied that marriage covenants are unconditional and unbreakable and that NO violations of the terms of agreement will affect the covenant because there are NO conditions! To imply that a marriage covenant has no conditions is a corruption of the marriage institution itself! Whenever the conditions of the covenant have been violated, broken or not met, there is a breach of contract and the covenant agreement was not fulfilled as agreed upon. Therefore, restitution, reconciliation and/or dissolving of the marriage covenant is sought. Covenants always stand upon the foundation of justice, truth and love rooted in morality.

Marriage covenants Sacred? YES! Permanent? No!

Only in two places in Scripture is marriage defined as permanent and indissolvable. They are in Deuteronomy 22:13-30 where God has actually REMOVED the right to divorce; not allowing the violating spouse to dissolve the marriage covenant. This means that when needed, the right to divorce (the dissolving of the marriage covenant) has always been there. In these cases that right was abused, so God revoked it for the sake of the woman.

The first instance was when the husband claimed that his new wife was not a virgin, when in fact, she was proved to be so. Because the husband brought a bad name upon her, *"...He cannot divorce her all his days"*

(Deuteronomy 22:19). The other case was when a man had sex with a virgin single woman. He must pay support money (the dowry of a bride) to her family, and by having sex with her he has taken her as his wife and "...[Was not] permitted to divorce her all his days" (Deuteronomy 22:29). But "if her father utterly refuses to give her to him [the marriage would be cancelled and father and daughter would keep the dowry]" (Exodus 22:16).

These are the only two cases where the covenant of marriage was NOT allowed to be dissolved. God removed the man's rights to dissolve the marriage in this case because he violated the woman without marrying her which was a greater violation. God forbade it to protect the woman so she would always be supported during her life. However, the wife still had the right to divorce her husband even though her husband could not divorce his wife. The right to divorce has always existed in the case of a marriage covenant being violated; however, in these cases, that right was lost. Thus, God recognizes that covenants are conditional.

Vows: Conditions of the Marriage Covenant

The vows of a marriage are the conditions of the covenant set forth before the marriage takes place. The marriage ceremony is the "place of agreement" where each partner takes a solemn oath to uphold the terms and conditions of the marriage covenant to which both parties have agreed. The "living together in a marriage union" is the environment in which the agreed-upon conditions of the covenant is carried out by both parties. Marriage IS a lifetime commitment; however, it is not a lifetime commitment without conditions. The ability to keep one's promise to "love" (keeping the marriage vows) is rooted in godly character. (See articles on The Extreme Significance of The Fruit of The Spirit and God's ("Unconditional") Love: It's Moral Its Conditional DivorceHope.com at <http://www.divorcehope.com/bibleteachingarchives.htm>).

Because the marriage covenant has been taught to be unconditional and unbreakable, it is powerfully inferred that there is no violation that can qualify for the covenant to be dissolved except in several far-reaching cases. Vows have come to mean nothing.

Let me give an example of an unconditional one-sided covenant agreement. It is your wedding day and you exchange vows with your beloved. The man says, "I take my wife, to have as I wish and to abuse if she does not listen, to meet all my needs, to hurt her as often as I desire because she is now my wife and cannot escape. I own her. I can have sex with anyone I desire and do as I please in complete disregard to her feelings." The wife says, "I take my dear husband to have and to hold, to cherish and to love, in sickness and disease, for better and for worse, always seeking ways to strengthen and grow our relationship till death do us part." NOBODY would ever consider such a vow; however, this is exactly what is taking place when the conditions of the marriage covenant are taught as being unconditional.

Covenant *is* Relationship

Covenant *is* relationship! "Relationship" in its very definition carries the fact that there is mutual caring and moral obligations between each party, and the fulfilling of needs within each other. Simply because there is a relationship, they are in covenant.

Covenants are protected by the covenant partners. This results in a covenant that has conditions and can be violated. The covenant partners are to protect their covenant from those outside the covenant, namely, those who have not been invited to be a part of their relationship. In the case of marriage, it would be any person outside the marriage because that person does not have exclusive rights to sharing the depths of each others emotions, bodily contact and sexual enjoyment.

How the Devil Used the Errors of the Marriage Covenant Being "Unconditional"

The devil was able to spin a web of lies and deceit which drove couples away from the original marriage covenant because of the errors taught by God's church. Of course the church did not decide to teach error; rather, the truth has been lost through time.

Let me explain. I believe that because the truths of marriage, divorce, remarriage, submission and covenant have been lost through time, it gave the devil a powerful opportunity to actually use the errors that are being taught as truth within the church to enslave many of God's people in bad marriages. His church, the very people of God, who have been given the awesome responsibility to uphold these truths have become the very taskmasters enslaving God's people by ignorantly upholding the devil's agenda.

Somewhere down through history well-intended translators of the Bible have adopted these errors as truth. I believe some were done purposely to fit their desires, but most were probably through ignorance. Because the famous Scripture of Malachi 2:16 has been translated and taught as "God hates divorce" instead of its real meaning of "God hates a separation (to marry another person without getting divorced first)," the devil was able to convince us that marriage covenants are unconditional. If he could get the church to believe that marriage covenants are unconditional, he could use the church itself as a prison camp to enslave God's people thereby disabling them from fulfilling the calling of God on their lives because of fear, guilt and shame. Sadly, He has accomplished his mission, to a great extent.

The devil was also able to tie together the wrong translation and teachings of "God hates divorce" to the church teaching that there are no valid claims in which one can divorce (because marriage is taught to be an unconditional covenant). This has propagated the message that the marriage vows (the conditions of the marriage covenant), are useless and invalid, thus binding the victim of the violation into an indissoluble relationship.

As sin and lukewarmness have been escalating within society and particularly the church, more and more people have been making wrong decisions regarding which mate they choose, many times resulting in going off into very bad marriages and sin. Because of the great marital problems this has created, it has caused marriage to be viewed as a failing institution.

Thus, the devil has in many ways been successful in presenting God's institution of marriage to be a failure. Not only is it a failure but the devil makes it into a prison where a person is united in an unconditional, indissoluble covenant relationship with another person who can abuse them at will and they have no way out while the church leadership is ignorantly poised as the devil's prison wardens. Because marriage is being now presented more like a prison than as a loving relationship, many have disregarded the original marriage structure, not because they wanted to, but because they were forced to safeguard their hearts in case of relationship violations. In other words, they have enacted their own covenant-relationship safeguards because the church has taken theirs away through ignorance and deception. The church can recapture the institution of marriage and again elevate it to its proper place and thereby pulling many from the fire; however, the restoration of these lost truths by God's leadership must come first. The church must acknowledge its failure in the teaching the errors regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage. In behalf of God's leadership, I ask you for forgiveness. Please pray for us! Stephen Gola.

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