



## NOTES FROM THE ORCHARD

### IS YOUR MARRIAGE A COVENANT OF WORKS OR A COVENANT OF GRACE?

Dr. John Kwasny

Marriage is a covenant—a solemn and sacred bond instituted *by* God and entered into *before* God. As a covenant, it should reflect the covenant between God and His people, in which Jesus Christ saved sinners through His death and resurrection. What do we call this

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covenant? The covenant of GRACE! The covenant of grace is God’s one plan of redemption for all who put their faith in Jesus. Our salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, by God’s grace alone!

So, it should make sense that if marriage is a covenant, Christian marriage should reflect God’s covenant of grace. Just as we individually enjoy the grace of God for our salvation and sanctification, our marriages should exude that same grace. But since marriage is always entered into by two sinners, it’s easy to base it on a

*covenant of works* rather than a *covenant of grace*. A works-based marriage will suffer under the same load that you and I would bear if we could only be saved by our works! Consider some of the characteristics of a marriage based on a covenant of works:

1. Spouses are primarily interested in what the other person is doing—mainly what he or she is doing wrong.
2. There is very little personal responsibility for one’s own actions and responses.
3. Spouses have very high expectations for each other.
4. Condemnation is administered when failure occurs.
5. Threats, manipulation, and the withholding of love characterize the marriage.
6. Love is conditional.
7. Forgiveness is conditional, if given at all.
8. There are long memories of hurts and offenses.
9. Spouses are regularly “let down” and disappointed.

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10. Marriage is an up and down, “rocky road” experience.

11. Spouses are self-centered—“He/she is not doing what I want/need!”

12. The lasting feeling is: “I can’t take this much longer...”

A marriage based on a covenant of works is exhausting! It lacks the essential fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. The bottom line is that this sort of Christian marriage falsely portrays God’s covenant of grace in Jesus Christ to a watching world!

So, as followers of Christ, we must strive to move off the faulty, broken foundation of the covenant of works to a solid, grace-based marriage. Here are some of the qualities that demonstrate this sort of life-giving grace:

1. Spouses accept one another for who they are.
2. Forgiveness flows for wrongs done to one another.
3. There’s no list-keeping; no record of wrongs.
4. Spouses love each other, even though they don’t deserve it.
5. Spouses show love to the unloveable!
6. Spouses show respect to one another, even though neither deserve it.
7. Sacrificial love permeates the marriage.
8. There’s very little retaliation, revenge, or manipulation.
9. There’s no score keeping.
10. There’s no self-righteousness—the great killer of marriage.
11. Neither spouse feels like he/she is working harder than the other.

12. The marriage is all about God, not about me.

This is not some sort of cheap grace! Basing your marriage on the covenant of grace does not mean that there is no confrontation or rebuke or correction. Just think about God’s grace to you. Does it mean you can live any way you want, and just enjoy the forgiveness of God? As the apostle Paul says: “May it never be!” Showing grace in your marriage isn’t a passive, doormat approach to real problems and real sin. It’s actually the only solution to handling the problems we all deal with in our marriages. The only hope to be found is in the gracious gospel and work of the Lord Jesus Christ!

So, let’s review. God’s relationship to you through Jesus Christ is covenantal. It’s not based on works, or none of us would see salvation and have eternal life with God. Thankfully, this covenant is all of grace, freely given by a loving Father and administered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christian marriage must reflect this covenant of grace to the watching world, as we are witnesses of our Savior’s love and mercy. But as sinners, we tend to build our marriages on the world’s foundation—a covenant of works. We need the grace of God, so we can glorify God by grounding our marriage in His grace!

As you evaluate yourself and your marriage, does all this seem impossible to you? It should! It’s much easier to operate within a works-righteousness mentality. It’s so much safer to keep score and withhold love and to walk in bitterness and unforgiveness. That’s why we need the grace of God and the power of Christ at work in our hearts! If you think you can actually do this thing called marriage, you will fail miserably. A grace-based marriage is only possible as you learn to rely more and more on the Spirit and His work in your sanctification!

## **THE BENEFITS OF AFFLICTION**

### **Mr. Caleb Cangelosi**

“Why is this happening to me?” That’s a question we’ve all asked at some point in our lives, and it’s one that I often hear from people going through great trials and

afflictions. The truth is, I don’t know the exact reason why God has ordained that a particular person walk through a particular set of difficult circumstances. Only

God knows the precise reason(s) why our various trials are necessary at this time in our life (see I Peter 1:6). But in His word, God has set forth for us many reasons why we go through periods of deep suffering. Trials come to refine and strengthen and grow our faith (I Peter 1:7). Trials come to make us stop trusting in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead (II Corinthians 1:9). Trials come so that we will be able to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (II Corinthians 1:3-4). Trials come to humble us and make us more dependent on the all-sufficient grace of God (II Corinthians 12:7-10). Trials come to produce for us “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (II

“METHINKS, IF WE MIGHT GO TO HEAVEN WITHOUT SUFFERING, WE SHOULD BE UNWILLING TO DESIRE IT. WHY SHOULD WE EVER WISH TO GO BY ANY OTHER PATH THAN THAT WHICH HE HAS CONSECRATED AND ENDEARED BY HIS OWN EXAMPLE?”

Corinthians 4:16-18; see Romans 8:17-18). Sometimes trials come because God is disciplining us for sins we’ve committed (see the story of Jonah, and John 5:14). Sometimes trials come as discipline in a more positive sense – not so much directly as a response to our rebellion, but to train us and make us holy (Hebrews 12:10-11; see James 1:2-4; Romans 5:1-5). And at all times, trials come for God’s glory, “so that the works of God might be displayed” in us (John 9:3; see I Peter 1:7). I could go on, but even these reasons should give us cause to declare with the Psalmist, “It is good for me that I was afflicted” (Psalm 119:71).

John Newton, the 18<sup>th</sup> century author of “Amazing Grace” and many other beautiful hymns, once wrote a letter which, in the published collection of his correspondence, is entitled, “The Benefits of Affliction.” He mentions several:

*First*, afflictions spur us on to prayer. When things are going well, we tend to think we don’t need God, but can

manage just fine on our own, thank you very much. “But troubles rouse our spirits,” writes Newton, “and constrain us to call upon the Lord in good earnest, when we feel a need of that help which we only can have from him.”

*Second*, afflictions remind us that this present world is passing away, and is ultimately unsatisfying. “The Lord, by pain, sickness, and disappointments...weakens our attachment to this world, and makes the thought of quitting it more desirable.” Our trials make us long for Jesus to return, and prepare us for the world to come, in which “there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

*Third*, Newton states that afflictions give us “a more enlarged and experimental acquaintance with God’s holy word, and the Lord’s wisdom, power, and goodness.” It’s one thing to be able to recite a Bible verse like, “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me and heard my cry” (Psalm 40:1); it’s another thing actually to wait on God, to cry out to God from a place of tremendous suffering, and to experience God incline toward you and hear you.

*Fourth*, afflictions allow us to see the reality of God’s work in our lives, and they strengthen and exercise the graces of the Spirit. “As our limbs and natural powers would be feeble if not called to daily exertion, so the graces of the Spirit would languish, without something provided to draw them out to use.”

*Finally*, afflictions conform us to Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior, who was a man of sorrows. Newton declares, “Methinks, if we might go to heaven without suffering, we should be unwilling to desire it. Why should we ever wish to go by any other path than that which he has consecrated and endeared by his own example?”

J. C. Ryle, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English pastor, well summarizes all that has been said: “Affliction is one of God’s medicines. By it He often teaches lessons which would be learned in no other way...Health is a great blessing, but sanctified disease is a greater. Prosperity and worldly comfort, are what all naturally desire; but losses and crosses are far better for us, if they lead us to Christ.”

May the Lord enable His people to trust in Him forever, remembering every day “that God causes all things to

work together for good to those who love God, to whose who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

## THE GOSPEL IN THE INCARNATION Dr. William Swan Plumer (1802-1880)

*William Swan Plumer was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Southern Presbyterian church planter, pastor, seminary professor, theologian, and prolific author. You can find more of his writings online at [www.williamswanplumer.wordpress.com](http://www.williamswanplumer.wordpress.com).*

Our Lord Jesus Christ became incarnate, was made under the law, lived, acted, obeyed, suffered died and rose again for his people. He came down to earth that they might go up to heaven. He suffered that they might reign. He became a servant that they might become kings and priests unto God. He died that they might live. He bore the cross that their enmity might be slain, and their sins expiated. He loved them that they might love God.

He was rich and became poor that they, who were poor, might be made rich. He descended into the lower parts of the earth that they might sit in heavenly places. He emptied himself that they might be filled with all the fullness of God. He took upon him human nature that they might be partakers of the divine nature. He made flesh his dwelling place that they might be an habitation of God through the Spirit.

He made himself of no reputation, that they might wear his new name, and be counted an eternal excellency. He became a worm, and no man, that they, who were sinful worms, might be made equal to the angels. He bore the curse of a broken covenant that they might partake of all the blessings of the everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure. Though heir of all things, he was willingly despised of the people, that they, who were justly condemned, might obtain and inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

His death was a satisfaction to divine justice, a ransom for many, a propitiation for sin, a sweet smelling savour to God, that we, who were an offense to God, might become his sons and daughters. He was made sin for his

people that they might be made the righteousness of God in him. Though Lord of all He took the form of a servant, that they, who were the servants of sin, might prevail like princes with God.

He, who had made swaddling-clothes bands for the sea, was wrapped in swaddling-clothes that they, who were cast out in their blood, might be clothed in linen white and clean, which is the righteousness of the saints. He had not where to lay His head that they who otherwise must have laid down in eternal sorrow, might read the

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mansions in His Father’s house. He was beset with lions and bulls of Bashan, that his chosen might be compassed about with an innumerable company of angels and of the spirits of just men made perfect. He drank the cup of God’s indignation that they might for ever drink of the river of His pleasures.

He hungered that they might eat the bread of life. He thirsted that they might drink the water of life. He was numbered with the transgressors that they might stand among the justified, and be counted among the jewels. He made His grave with the wicked that they might sleep in Jesus.

Though He was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was, yet He became a helpless infant, that creatures of yesterday, sentenced to death, might live for ever. He wore a crown of thorns that all, who love His appearing, might wear a crown of life. He wept tears of anguish that His elect might weep tears of repentance not to be repented of. He bore the yoke of obedience unto death that they might find His yoke easy and His burden light.

He poured out His soul unto death, lay three days in the heart of the earth, then burst the bars of death, and arose to God, that they, who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage, might obtain the victory over the grave and become partakers of His resurrection. He exhausted the penalty of the law that His redeemed might have access to the inexhaustible treasures of mercy, wisdom, faithfulness, truth and grace promised by the Lord.

He passed from humiliation to humiliation, till He reached the sepulcher of Joseph, that His people might be changed from glory to glory as by the Spirit of the Lord. He was matchless in grace that they might be matchless in gratitude. Though a Son, He became a voluntary exile, that they, who had wickedly wandered afar off, might be brought nigh by His blood.

He was compassed about with all their innocent infirmities that He might perfect His strength in their

weakness. His visage was so marred more than any man, that His ransomed might be presented before God without spot, or blemish, or wrinkle, or any such thing. For a time He was forsaken of His Father that they, whom He bought with His blood, might behold the light of God's countenance forever.

He came and dwelt with them that they might be forever with the Lord. He was hung up naked before His insulting foes that all, who believe on His name, might wear a glorious wedding garment, a spotless righteousness. Though He was dead, He is the firstborn among many brethren. Through His sorrow His people obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing flee away. Though He endured the worst things, they do and shall forever enjoy the best things.

Wonderful mystery! God was manifested in the flesh! Here is no absurdity, no contradiction, no fiction, and yet a mystery that baffles all attempts to solve it, and dazzles all human and angelic vision. Blessed is he, who is not offended in Jesus. Blessed is he, who loves the incarnate mystery, and rests upon it. It is a mystery of love, of power, of salvation. It is the mystery of Godliness. It is the great study of the inhabitants of heaven, and shall be while immortality endures. [Excerpted from William Swan Plumer, *The Grace of Christ*, chapter 21]

## **MOVING FORWARD: GOD'S CALL FOR REDEMPTIVE ETHNIC UNITY**

**Mr. Lance Lewis, Pastor of Soaring Oaks PCA in Elk Grove, CA**

*Yesterday (February 14, 2016), we had the privilege of hearing from Jonathan Seda, the pastor of Grace Church (PCA) in Dover, Delaware, regarding the biblical call to racial and cultural diversity in the local church. As you chew on his words, the following from Pastor Lance Lewis will be a good encouragement to put what you heard and learned into practice (the following is a condensation of a seminar Pastor Lewis gave at the 2015 PCA General Assembly; for the text of the entire seminar, contact Pastor Caleb or Jason Miller, chairman of the Neighborhood Diversity Committee).*

Redemptive ethnic unity is the tangible unity God has called His people in Christ to experience and enjoy across ethnic and socio-economic lines within the local church. It's a unity promised by God (Genesis 12:3; Psalm 72; Micah 4:1-5), commanded and prayed for by our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49; John 4:27-38; 10:14-16; 17:1-26), experienced by the infant church (Acts 2:8-11, 39; 6:1-7; 8:4-8, 26-40; 10:1-48; 11:19-30; 13:1), taught by the apostles (Ephesians 2:11-

4:32; I Peter 2:1-9), and realized fully in the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 7:9-17).

In light of these Biblical foundations, consider the following questions: Do you view the pursuit of redemptive ethnic unity a mandate that flows from the Scripture's teaching on salvation or an option that is peripheral to the declaration and spread of the gospel? Are you committed to demonstrating Christ's love to people of other ethnic groups? Do you see redemptive ethnic unity as crucial to your witness of the gospel in our society? Are you willing to pursue redemptive ethnic unity in humility (which moves us to embrace aspects of other church cultures while refusing to insist that they always conform to ours)? When considering the issue of race/ethnicity are you more inclined to think politically or redemptively?

Once you've seen the need to pursue redemptive ethnic unity, how do you move forward, where do you start?

1. Begin by making this a consistent item of prayer within your life, family, ministry or church.

2. Focus on getting to know, love and serve those of different races.

3. Be committed to learning their story. The following list, though in no way exhaustive, provides a good perspective on vital aspects of black history, thought and experience.

- *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
- *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Dubois
- *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, by Alex Haley
- *Eyes on the Prize*, a documentary series on the Civil Rights years (1954-1965)
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley
- *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya
- *The African-Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* (a documentary by Dr. Henry Louis Gates)

4. Listen to their perspective on the issue of race and ethnicity.

- *Free at Last: The Gospel in the African-American Experience*, by Carl F. Ellis
- *On Being Black and Reformed: a New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience*, by Anthony Carter
- *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions*, edited by Anthony Bradley
- *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, by Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson
- *Winning the Race to Unity: Is Racial Reconciliation Working*, by Clarence E. Shuler
- *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Unequal, Hostile*, by Andrew Hacker
- *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, by Derrick Bell
- *What's Going On*, by Nathan McCall
- *Don't Believe the Hype: Fighting Cultural Misinformation about African-Americans*, by Farai Chideya
- *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology*, by Jarvis J. Williams

5. Check out some of their art.

6. Build genuine relationships. A genuine relationship is one in which the subject of race/ethnicity is not "taboo." Be open and willing to learn, be challenged and change.

Redemptive ethnic unity is God's express will for His church today (Ephesians 2:11-3:7). The unity of the church across ethnic lines is not and has never been a marginal issue to our Lord Jesus Christ (John 10:14-18, ch. 17). The pursuit of redemptive ethnic unity may be one of the keys to a relevant witness that demonstrates and displays the power, beauty, wisdom and glory of the gospel. Like strong, godly marriages, redemptive ethnic unity won't happen if we never pray about it, talk about it and pursue it. Once more our gracious God is giving us a providential opportunity to advance the gospel in this country. May God give us grace, courage, humility and boldness to be used by Him to show the world something powerful, beautiful and glorious about our salvation and our great and loving Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.