

Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren:

Most of us with any background in God's church have been taught about the sanctity of marriage, how marriage pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church, and principles for having a happy marriage. But because of the strong influence of Babylon and Egypt in our secular societies today, it is amazing how many false concepts often still persist in the minds of God's children concerning this very sacred institution. Because of that, we want to focus on some very fundamental principles which are often assumed or taken for granted, but which should form the very foundation of our thinking about marriage.

People in our modern societies around the world get married as a matter of course. We have all grown up being familiar with the typical procedure most use in Western culture to become husband and wife. The man proposes marriage to the woman. If she accepts, they become engaged. The man may (or may not) then ask her father for his blessing out of respect, or to conform to a quaint tradition. Much effort is then put into planning the trappings of the marriage ceremony and reception. On the list of "must dos" is obtaining the marriage licence from the local government entity which regulates legal marriages. One must also secure the services of a "licenced" clergy member, justice of the peace, ship's captain, or whatever credentialed person that particular government recognizes with the authority to preside over the ceremony. Vows of some kind are typically exchanged in the presence of witnesses, and the presiding authority then registers the required documents certifying all legal requirements have been met. Consummation takes place on the wedding night and legal paperwork is recorded in the government office, making the two officially husband and wife.

Is this not what we commonly anticipate as part of the process for forming a new marriage? But have you ever stopped to ask how many of these traditions are God-ordained as opposed to man-made? Which ones are really necessary and why? What is really required to make a marriage in the eyes of God? An analysis of these fundamental principles should be enlightening indeed.

What Is and What Makes a Marriage?

Before we can properly address the real requirements to make a binding marriage in God's eyes, we must first understand what is marriage.

Marriage is a covenant agreement between an eligible man and woman to take each other for life and to live together, support each other, and to sacrifice for the sake of that union as long as they both shall live. If marriage is a covenant agreement, what is a covenant, and where does the Bible confirm these assertions are true?

First, some are surprised to discover there is no Biblical example giving the particulars of an acceptable wedding ceremony between a man and a woman. There are many statements concerning marriages being formed, but very little in detail about the specifics of those unions. Notice the only references made concerning Adam's marriage to Eve:

And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh (Genesis 2:22–24).

Some have claimed that since no ceremony is specifically described here, it did not happen, and that the very act of Adam "taking" Eve and living with her made them married. This claim is further advanced by stating the same is true with the marriage of Jacob to Leah:

And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her. And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her (Genesis 29:21–23).

So they had a wedding feast (a reception), but since there is no evidence of an exchange of vows, such vows must not be required, they say. Laban simply "gave" Leah to Jacob, and it says he "went in unto her," with no description of a formal wedding ceremony. But is such rationalization true? The answer actually comes not from trying to find Biblical evidence of the exchange of vows between men and women in the Bible, but in examining the *covenants* made between God and His own chosen people.

Marriage Is a Covenant!

Marriage absolutely is formed by the exchange of vows, and nothing short of it. Note the beginning of this proof from the spiritual marriage relationship recorded in Ephesians:

So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.* This is a great mystery: but *I speak concerning Christ and the church* (Ephesians 5:28–32) [emphasis mine].

Here the Apostle Paul was inspired to quote from Genesis, chapter two, regarding Adam taking Eve as his wife, yet he said it was really about Christ taking *the Church* as *His* wife! If so, do we have more details about Christ's marriage(s) that will shed light on the specifics? What is required for the New Testament Church ultimately to be married to Christ? Does He just "take her" and begin to cohabit, or is there something more formal required to make that marriage binding? Interestingly, God did not choose to provide us advanced details about the future ceremony to take place when the Lamb marries the Church at His triumphant Second Coming (Revelation 19:7–9). But He *did* record much more detail about His *first* marriage to the church in the wilderness—the physical type of that future Bride—which was ancient Israel (Acts 7:38). It is from this Old Testament account that we find the greatest detail about the requirements of a legitimate marriage ceremony, and proof that more than simple cohabitation is required.

The original covenant God made with Israel was indeed performed in a marriage ceremony. Notice this quote from an article written by Mr. Raymond Cole for *The Plain Truth* magazine in April 1956, entitled, *The New Covenant—Does It Abolish God's Law?*, which summarizes well the teaching of God's church on this important point:

The real reason most churches don't understand the truth about the covenants is that they don't even know what a "covenant" is! Webster defines a covenant as "a mutual *agreement*, a legal undertaking to do or not to do or to refrain from some act, *a document containing the terms of agreement.*" A covenant is an agreement between parties. The Eternal God *proposed* the old covenant with Israel in Exodus 19:5, 6. Here were the parties to the agreement or covenant. Notice what it says: "If ye (Israel) will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant"—that was Israel's part of the agreement, "*then*"—and this was the ETERNAL'S part of the agreement, the part he promised to do—"ye

shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." Did the people accept this *proposal*? "And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken *we will do*" (verse 8).

The article goes on to prove that this agreement—the exchange of promises between God and Israel—was indeed a *marriage* covenant. Notice what Ezekiel stated:

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and *entered into a covenant with thee*, saith the Lord GOD, and *thou becamest mine* (Ezekiel 16:8) [emphasis mine].

So God actually swore an oath to Israel in a special covenant. For those who might still claim, however, that this is not describing a *marriage* covenant, let Jeremiah remove all doubt:

Not according to *the covenant that I made with their fathers* in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although *I was an husband unto them*, saith the LORD (Jeremiah 31:32) [emphasis mine].

God says He was husband to Israel. "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you" (Jeremiah 3:14). When did such a marriage take place? It was at Mt. Sinai when He entered into that formal, covenant agreement with them. That covenant did not occur on its own out of thin air just because God began to lead and dwell with Israel—to cohabit—but only after He and Israel knowingly and thoughtfully exchanged promises to each other. The exchange of those promises was not a superficial act. It was a binding pact, confirmed by blood!

And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and *sprinkled it on the people*, and said, Behold *the blood of the covenant*, which the LORD hath made with you concerning *all these words* (Exodus 24:7–8) [emphasis mine].

All of *what* words? The words of the vows Israel and God exchanged! So we find in this account the most detailed explanation of what God includes in a marriage covenant ceremony. It verifies that an exchange of vows between each party is definitely required for such a covenant to be created, even if God chose not to record the details of the specific vows given between Adam and Eve or Jacob and Leah.

Some have tried to use a quotation from Mr. Herbert Armstrong's 1973 booklet, *Marriage & Divorce*, as proof that binding marriages are created without the exchange of vows. Mr. Armstrong said:

Many have assumed that a marriage is bound by a vow. The Bible nowhere uses the word vow in connection with marriage . . .

The problem is, using this edited comment on its own is misleading and intellectually dishonest. Reading the full quote makes Mr. Armstrong's intent very clear: to support the absolute *necessity* of the exchange of vows. Here is the full quote:

The Bible nowhere uses the word vow in connection with marriage, but it does refer to it with a word directly related to the word "cleave." In Malachi 2:14, referring to the wife, it states: "She is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant." Marriage is a covenant with God between husband and wife. It is a type of the New Covenant with Christ. It is referred to thus in Ezekiel 16 and elsewhere. It is a formal, solemn, and binding agreement or compact. A betrothal is an agreement or compact to be later married, between the two who are betrothed. But the MARRIAGE is an agreement, compact, or covenant they make WITH GOD, who binds it for the remainder of the natural lives of the couple. What, then, constitutes a valid marriage? When two people, of marriageable age, sincerely and solemnly covenant with each other, in the presence of witnesses, to take each other as husband and wife, then upon consummating that covenant agreement by becoming "one flesh" in sexual intercourse, they are bound for their natural lives by the Eternal God.

This should leave no doubt what is the faith once delivered on this issue. Note also that this covenant is more than just a contract. A contract also is a commitment between two parties who exchange promises and agree to do or not to do something. But the covenant of marriage has the *added element* of being a contract involving God! That is what makes it a holy covenant. Any contract in which God is a party is holy. All holy covenants are fundamentally contracts, but not all contracts are holy covenants. How does this distinction make any difference? Two people can enter into a contract and promise to do or not do something. But in the future, if both of them consent to nullify the agreement, they can do so. But with a holy covenant of marriage that God has bound, God is a party to the contract. Yes, the man and woman are the ones who entered into the contract of marriage, but it is God who enforces it and prevents either one of them from ever nullifying it, even if they both want to in the future. That is the difference.

What Form of Vows Are Required?

Those of us who have grown up in the occidental world are accustomed to the traditional "Christian" wedding ceremony. Bride and groom stand before the minister or magistrate, who asks something like, "Do you take this man (woman) to be your lawfully wedded husband (wife) . . ." After each says, "I do," the magistrate pronounces them husband and wife. But is this the only format that God accepts as a legitimate exchange of vows?

The format described above is based upon the traditions of religious Christianity within this world. But those claiming the Christian faith make up only about 33 percent of the world population. The rest of the world, also believing and practicing marriage, uses very different traditions for actually forming those matrimonial unions.

Over 14 percent of the world practices Hinduism, and these nine hundred million people form marriage bonds with a totally different ceremony than do we. From the October 2006, *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* online:

The Hindu marriage ceremony is essentially a Vedic yajña (a fire-sacrifice), in which the Aryan deities are invoked in the archaic Indo-Aryan style. The primary witness of a Hindu marriage is the fire-deity (or the Sacred Fire) Agni, and by law and by tradition, no Hindu marriage is deemed complete unless in the presence of the Sacred Fire, seven encirclements have been made around it by the bride and the groom together [Saptapadi].

In summary, the groom and bride take seven steps together around the fire god, chanting particular mantras as they go, after which they are deemed married.

Will following this procedure constitute a bound marriage in the eyes of the true God? We will answer that in a moment. But notice first another example.

Those who practice Buddhism or Chinese traditional religion make up 12 percent of the world population. These nearly eight hundred million people also use a very unique procedure for joining husbands and wives. From The Chinese Historical and Cultural Project at www.chcp.org, the Chinese Wedding Tea Service is described:

The bride and groom were conducted to the family altar, where they paid homage to Heaven and Earth, the family ancestors and the Kitchen God, Tsao-Chün. Tea, generally with two lotus seeds or two red dates in the cup, was offered to the groom's parents. Then the bride and groom bowed to each

other. This completed the marriage ceremony, except in some regions, where both also drank wine from the same goblet, ate sugar molded in the form of a rooster, and partook of the wedding dinner together.

From the days of American slavery, African slaves were not permitted to marry using "traditional Christian" rites. So to enjoy the benefits of marriage and family as much as possible, even without being "legal," they developed their own wedding ceremony in which bride and groom would hold hands and together jump over a broom handle held parallel to the floor.

Do any or all of these pagan practices constitute binding marriage vows in the eyes of God, even though they do not conform to our Western traditions? Yes, indeed they do! Notice what Mr. Armstrong said in a June, 1952, article of *The Plain Truth* entitled, *The Plain Truth About Divorce and Remarriage*:

It is GOD, not man, who *joins* husband and wife together! . . . The minister doesn't "tie the knot." . . . It is GOD who binds them as one flesh FOR LIFE. It pertains to "saved" and "unsaved" alike—to all races, creeds, and colors. It is not an ordinance of the CHURCH—the marriage institution started with CREATION, long before there was any church. It is for MALE and FEMALE, regardless of the church. They become ONE FLESH, not one spirit. From Creation to now, every man and woman who have taken each other as man and wife have been JOINED TOGETHER as ONE FLESH by the Eternal GOD for the remainder of their natural lives!

This means human beings do not have to know the true God to be able to marry. No, this was the gross perversion that came into God's church in 1974, when the Worldwide Church of God ministry began to teach that God did not bind the marriages of the unconverted, but only those called into the church. How abominable! It was a violent rejection of the Truth God revealed concerning the institution of marriage. Does God bind the marriages of the uncalled of this world, including the heathen? You better believe He does! As Mr. Armstrong confirmed, marriage was ordained from the beginning, and God binds the vows of *all* peoples, even those worshiping false gods. It has nothing to do with "the church." It is a *fleshly* institution as it applies to carnal man, not a spiritual one. All humanity has been cut off from God for nearly six thousand years. Even those claiming to be "Christian" are not obeying the true God, but worshiping the god of this world—Satan the Devil. They are as pagan and heathen as anyone else. So how is the Western "Christian" wedding ceremony any more acceptable to God than the fire god ceremony of the Hindu, the worship of ancestors and the Kitchen God by the Chinese, or the broom-jumping ceremony of the Africans? They are no different in the eyes of God, because *none of them* constitutes proper worship of the One True God.

But the point of the wedding ceremony—to God—has nothing to do with proper worship of God. He is neither binding nor not binding based upon their knowledge and acceptance of Him. God binds the vows of *all human beings*, called or uncalled. A promise is a promise. Those who make promises and then break them violate the eighth and ninth commandments against stealing and lying. When it is a marriage vow which is broken, they also break the seventh commandment against adultery. But according to the Worldwide ministry in 1974, God is not involved in the vows of the unconverted, so none of their promises are binding. Really? Without realizing it, they were actually saying that the heathen of the world can never be guilty of theft by breaking their commitments, because God never holds them to their vows. Is it really true that only converted members of God's true church can break the seventh, eighth and ninth commandments by reneging on a promise? How preposterous. If so, we can be more righteous and avoid breaking God's commandments by remaining Gentiles—separated from God.

Why are the peculiar wedding rituals of the heathen all accepted by God as forming binding marriages? Because they all have the *necessary ingredient* to make lawful marriages—the promise of both bride and groom to take each other for life and to become one flesh. The free will choice to make a vow. But one will claim that the Chinese Tea Service does not require them to make such a promise during the ceremony! The Hindu ceremony does not have bride and groom making formal promises to each other. The Africans who jump over the broom never "say the magic words." Oh, but in every single case, both bride and groom know and accept that by going through the ritual, that is exactly what they are committing to do, whether specific words are used or not. God looks upon the heart. He knows when a man and woman are making a covenant to take each other as man and wife for life. And even when they do not know Him, God binds their vows for life.

Therefore, be not deceived. Whether you were raised in the occidental world or not, if you committed yourself to a marriage union in time past, even using a "non-traditional" pagan procedure—like jumping the broom or walking the seven steps of the Hindu Saptapadi—your vow is binding in the eyes of God.

Are Forced Marriages Required by God Today?

Some have falsely assumed that an act of fornication by a man and woman "automatically" makes them married in God's eyes. Is this true? Nothing could be further from the truth. But the claim stems from an interpretation of Exodus, chapter twenty-two, and Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-two, which we need to analyze in detail.

And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins (Exodus 22:16–17).

If a man find a damsel that is a virgin, which is not betrothed, and lay hold on her, and lie with her, and they be found; Then the man that lay with her shall give unto the damsel's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife; because he hath humbled her, he may not put her away all his days (Deuteronomy 22:28–29).

What should first be obvious is that the commanded marriage did not happen automatically by virtue of the act of fornication. The command says that two eligible ones who are caught in fornication *must* marry. It does not say they are *already* married. They were required to go through the steps of *becoming* married, including receiving the father's permission (more on this vital point later).

Does this mean that young men and women today who are guilty of fornication are obligated to marry in the eyes of God? The answer is no. But how can that be, some have asked? The key is recognizing that forced marriage as a result of fornication was never part of the spiritual law of God which has always existed (the Ten Commandments and supporting statutes), but instead part of the *temporary law* which was added until the sacrifice of Christ and the New Testament era. How can we be sure? Some have actually left God's church over this issue, claiming we are being liberal and are justifying fornication by erasing the "penalty" for fornication if a young man is not obligated to take responsibility for his actions in defiling the innocence of a young woman. Are we really trying to water down God's laws like the Protestants, claiming that God's immutable laws have been "done away"? Not at all.

Look at the context of the command for forced marriage as a result of fornication in Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-two. The penalty for proven sexual misconduct by all categories of people was death, *except* for those who were not married or betrothed. Notice the verses that directly precede the command for forced marriage:

If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then *they shall both of them die*, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel. If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and *ye shall stone them with stones that they die*; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you (Deuteronomy 22:22–24) [emphasis mine].

This was the letter of the law—the death penalty for capital crimes against God's commandments. Sexual misconduct in the Old Covenant carried the death penalty, as did

all other capital crimes. The only exception was for an unmarried (or unbetrothed) man and woman. Why? They were the only possible cases in which things could be "made right." In every other case, a married individual who committed adultery could not "make it right" by marrying his illicit partner, because he or she was already married—bound to someone else! There was no other solution in those cases. But with two unmarried people who committed this capital crime, they were in a position to rectify it somewhat by getting married, and God permitted that. What was the alternative if they refused to marry each other? The very same penalty that befell all the others found guilty of violating the seventh commandment—death! Therefore, we find that a forced marriage was a *direct alternative* to being put to death.

Now to answer the question of this law's applicability in the New Testament era, are confirmed adulterers still under the physical death penalty today? Most in God's true church would agree that adultery is still a terrible sin, but that it is a sin that can be forgiven and put under the shed blood of Christ, if there is legitimate and sincere repentance. If that is true, why would anyone insist that forced marriage as a penalty for fornication was still applicable? It is part of the very same body of law that demands execution of adulterers! How can forced marriage for fornicators still be applicable if stoning for adulterers is not? It simply does not make sense. One cannot pick and choose which aspects of penalties one will choose to enforce, based upon personal preferences.

Are we then saying that fornication is no longer a sin? Of course not! It was not the seventh commandment against sexual misconduct that was done away. That law has existed from the beginning, still exists today, and will exist forever. What was temporary and "done away" by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was the *penal code*, which demanded death *or* forced marriage as *a punishment* for sin. Death and forced marriage were never part of the original law. God's original commandment did not say, "Thou shalt kill all adulterers." No, it said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). We know that God said separately that the penalty for breaking that perfect immutable law was death (Romans 6:23), but we also know that the very purpose of Christ's sacrifice was to allow us to be *forgiven* of our capital crimes and come under the grace of His shed blood, freeing us from the ordinance that was against us (Colossians 2:14). It was not God's law—defining sin and obedience—that was against us, but the penal code that required death *as a result* of our sins. That was the ordinance that had to be removed, that we might retain hope for salvation, in spite of our weaknesses of flesh. But if the *death penalty* was removed for those under the grace of Christ's blood, so was the *forced marriage penalty* for those under that same grace.

Can an Act of Sin Create a Marriage?

There have been those in God's church in past decades who have considered themselves "spiritually superior and more conservative" on marriage principles than Mr.

Herbert Armstrong or even this ministry, because they hold to the concept that those committing fornication automatically become married in God's eyes. But such a position only reveals the lack of fundamental understanding of the essence of God's laws. We are not giving licence to fornicators. God ordained many automatic physical penalties for breaking His laws which exact a heavy toll. Fornication—apart from a forced marriage requirement—results in potential unwanted pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, violation of trust in a future marriage, and other mental curses that may hamper peaceful and complete unity with a future husband or wife. God can and will forgive the death penalty for a repentant fornicator, but that does not remove the automatic physical curses God ordered for disobedience. No one "gets away" with sin.

Besides that, the letter of the Old Covenant penalty says, "If a man find a damsel that is a virgin . . . and lie with her, *and they be found* . . ." (Deuteronomy 22:28), they are then forced to marry. But what if no one catches them or ever finds out? In that case they are *not* forced to marry, because no one is threatening them with death. Do they then "get away" with it? No, all of the other potential penalties will be upon them automatically. The same is true of the penalty for murder. Recall that God commanded death only if a murderer was convicted with the testimony of at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6). What if he was guilty, but there were no witnesses, or only one witness? The murderer, however guilty, walked away free in Israel. Did that make God "weak" on murder? No, there are likewise many other penalties that automatically kick in for anyone who violates one of God's immutable laws. The sinner—including the murderer—never really gets away with it.

Ironically, one who believes that God automatically binds a couple in marriage through the act of fornication is not actually being "more respectful" and conservative with God's truth, but besmirching the very image of the holy marriage institution. Why? Marriage is a sacred covenant picturing the relationship of Christ and His Bride. It is a relationship built upon the conscious volition—free will choice—of each party to vow lifelong faithfulness to each other in a binding covenant. Do we really think then that God springs "secret marriages" upon couples through the commission of despicable sin? Marriage is never the natural outcome of the sin of carnal lust. Otherwise, we are saying sin produces marriage, but sin only and always begets curses. Marriage as an institution is not a curse! No, marriage is always a result of the purposeful intent of two contracting parties to vow faithfulness to each other for life, and anyone who claims otherwise is actually calling marriage a curse.

This is proven by the procedures commanded for one to become part of the Bride of Christ—spiritual Israel. Does God ever force someone to become a member of the Body of Christ against his will? Of course not. Baptism into that Body—the Church—is a choice of personal volition, and must never be coerced. The vow made by anyone who is doing so

against his own will—by the threat of another—never makes a binding contract. Such a contract is null and void from inception. This principle is likewise understood and reflected in many of man's legal systems today. Anyone who is proven to have been coerced into a contract commitment is not held by the court to be liable for that promise. It is a principle that derives from God. This principle, however, has been abused by many who want to find a loophole to get out of their obligations. They claim—after the fact—that they were coerced, when no real coercion actually took place. Coercion is not just "pressure." A young girl might feel *pressured* by family or friends to marry a particular man. A young man might feel *pressured* to marry a girl he gets pregnant. If they give in to that pressure, they cannot later claim they did so against their own wills. No, real coercion is a direct threat—as in bodily harm by someone willing and able to inflict it—if one will not recite a particular vow. It is truly having a gun held to one's head. That is very different than social or economic pressure. A woman might feel pressured to marry to save herself from feared poverty or starvation. That is not coercion either. That is still her *choice* as a way to solve her problems—even if fear of the future is motivating her—and God will hold her accountable for her vow.

Do Fathers Have Authority?

An important part of the Exodus, chapter twenty-two, and Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-two, command also reveals special authority God gave to fathers concerning the marriages of their daughters. Recall that God said:

And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. *If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him*, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins (Exodus 22:16–17) [emphasis mine].

Can a father refuse to give approval for his daughter to marry, and prevent a binding union? Absolutely! Does it still apply today? Most definitely! That principle is not part of the penal code—the penalty for violation of the law—but the fundamental right God bestowed upon fathers in a very separate and distinct *statute of law*. This principle was not first defined in Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-two, but in Numbers, chapter thirty:

If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth. If a woman also vow a vow unto the LORD, and bind herself by a bond, *being in her father's house in her youth*; And her father hear her vow, and her bond wherewith she hath bound her soul, and her father shall

hold his peace at her: then all her vows shall stand, and every bond wherewith she hath bound her soul shall stand. But *if her father disallow her in the day that he heareth; not any of her vows, or of her bonds wherewith she hath bound her soul, shall stand*: and the LORD shall forgive her, because her father disallowed her (Numbers 30:2–5) [emphasis mine].

God gave fathers authority over their unwed daughters, to uphold or to nullify their vows. It applies still today, even though our Babylonian societies under Satan say otherwise. But this is precisely the origin of the "custom" of a young man asking a father's blessing to marry his daughter, and the act of the father "giving away" his daughter at the altar. It is not just some trivial nicety, but the binding law of God. It is interesting that this custom is still extant today, although without force of conviction for the majority. But any father who aggressively and absolutely refuses to approve his daughter's marriage can do so with God's authority. (Some fathers associated with God's church in times past have tried, after the fact, to claim they never gave real approval for their daughters' marriages. This is most common when a marriage breaks up and the family begins looking for justification to say it was never bound. Perhaps in some cases that may be valid, but in most cases, the father never voiced denial of his daughter's vow, never treated her as a fornicator while she was "happy" in the "marriage," and his silence at the time was actually counted by God as tacit approval.)

There is no option for a young girl to elope and get married against her father's wishes. She might get an official within man's government to marry her, but without the father's approval, it is not a marriage in God's eyes. Even if she exchanges vows with a man and follows all other protocols, God will not honor it, and she will be committing fornication by living with him. That is how serious this issue is to God. This is why Jacob was forced to deal with Laban in order to marry his beloved, Rachel. Laban held all the cards, and he had God's authority to back it up, even if he was using that authority in a contemptible way.

Note also that a father never has the authority to force his daughter to marry against her own will, even though that has certainly been practiced in many cultures around the world. God's law concerning vows (Numbers, chapter thirty) expressly states the father has the authority to either confirm or to annul a vow that his daughter has chosen to make on her own. There is no provision for any third party—father or otherwise—to ever coerce someone else into making a vow. The only forced marriage provision in God's law was not a whim of the father, but a demand of the penal code of Israel as an alternative to death by stoning because of fornication.

Therefore, to our list of elements required for a legitimate marriage, add to the exchange of vows, the approval of the father. This one is likewise critical.

The Role of Human Officials in Marriage

Does it require a marriage license from one's local government and a certified official to perform the wedding ceremony in order to be binding in God's eyes? No, it does not! Man has no right to insinuate himself into the business of marriage. God gave no human government such a right, and no one but God wields authority to bind a marriage. Notice what else Mr. Armstrong said in the 1952 article, *The Plain Truth About Divorce and Remarriage*:

Marriage is not a human institution; it is not a political, a civil, a legal, or even a church institution—it was originated with Adam and Eve from Creation; it was instituted by GOD, and not man; its authority is solely that of GOD, not man! Therefore MAN-MADE LAWS CONTRARY TO THOSE OF GOD HAVE NO AUTHORITY OVER MARRIAGE! Its only binding laws are those of GOD. And GOD HAS NEVER GIVEN ANY AUTHORITY WHATSOEVER FOR ANY BODY OF MEN, CIVIL, ECCLESIASTICAL OR OTHERWISE, TO LEGISLATE ON MARRIAGE CONTRARY TO HIS MARRIAGE LAWS!

So a human government cannot prevent someone from getting married by refusing to issue a marriage license. Neither can man's governments require that a certified official preside over the vows. There is no example in the Bible of a minister, justice of the peace, or any other official being required to conduct a wedding ceremony. As we have already seen, all that is required is for two people to exchange vows before God. Technically, according to God's rules, they can do that themselves, in private, without anyone to officiate.

However, Mr. Armstrong did not encourage couples to do that. Here is what he continued to say in the 1952 article:

Since our human governments have legislated laws concerning marriage, and since we are to be SUBJECT to the government that is over us (but without breaking the laws of God), all couples naturally should satisfy the man-made laws so far as they conform to those of God, by securing a marriage license and having a legal ceremony properly recorded.

But we should be very careful never to begin to think their licences and rules have anything to do with making a legal marriage in God's eyes. They do not! But according to the principle above, God's church has always provided a structured religious ceremony and a set of written vows, and has traditionally conducted such weddings using God's own ministers to preside, who are registered with our governments as legal officials.

What About Witnesses?

Recall from Mr. Armstrong's previously quoted 1973 booklet, *Marriage & Divorce*, that he stated:

When two people, of marriageable age, sincerely and solemnly covenant with each other, *in the presence of witnesses*, to take each other as husband and wife, then upon consummating that covenant agreement by becoming "one flesh" in sexual intercourse, they are bound for their natural lives by the Eternal God [emphasis mine].

Who are acceptable witnesses for a wedding ceremony? Are other human witnesses always required for God to bind two people in holy matrimony?

Understand first that the concept of witnesses is another consideration of law and legal procedure. According to the laws of man, many agreements require that the exchange of promises between contracting parties be witnessed by one or more persons. It is a way to confirm that the exchange of vows actually took place, because there were other people who saw it happen, lest one of the parties later tries to lie and say it never occurred.

But are the use of witnesses to a legal contract an invention of man? Not at all, since God even uses witnesses to confirm His own promises.

I call *heaven and earth to witness against you* this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed (Deuteronomy 4:26) [emphasis mine].

Here God made a promise that because Israel had disobeyed Him, He would curse them. And He called upon heaven and earth to be witnesses of this vow which He bound Himself to perform. Those astral bodies in the heavens do exactly what God told them to do, and by their faithfulness, are a constant reminder of the eternal nature of God's laws. They always obey, even when man does not. That is how they are witnesses against the rebellious.

But what kind of witness is required to make a legitimate marriage? Does it have to be one or two other human beings who are present to hear the exchange of vows between the bride and groom? This is certainly advisable, to avoid any doubt in the minds of other people whether the vows were actually made. Boaz had the benefit of many witnesses when he took Ruth as his wife:

Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: *ye are witnesses this day* (Ruth 4:10) [emphasis mine].

But is a human witness technically required by God to make a marriage? We accept that Adam and Eve were legitimately married, but what witnesses were there to confirm the exchange of their vows? There were no other human beings alive on the earth at that time. Yet Adam and Eve were bound in marriage by God. Likewise, what human witnesses were present at the marriage of God and Israel at Mt. Sinai? All of those Israelites were part of the bride, so they could not likewise be third-party witnesses at the same time. Yet their marriage to God was absolutely binding. Who were the witnesses?

First, note that God Himself acts as a witness. The Apostle Paul called on God as his witness. "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son . . ." (Romans 1:9). It certainly makes sense that God's holy angels would be credible witnesses as well. Interestingly, unlike man's requirements for separate witnesses, God seems to allow even the contracting parties to act as their own witnesses in given cases. Notice what Joshua stated after Israel reconfirmed her marriage covenant with God upon entering the Promised Land:

And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the LORD. And Joshua said unto the people, *Ye are witnesses against yourselves* that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, *We are witnesses* (Joshua 24:21–22) [emphasis mine].

Here was a binding covenant which included no other human witnesses, but it is certain the people themselves were witnesses, and so were God and His holy angels. God even chooses to use more flexibility in assignment of witnesses than man would ever do:

And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, *this stone shall be a witness* unto us; for *it hath heard all the words of the LORD* which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God (Joshua 24:27) [emphasis mine].

We know that stones cannot truly "hear," yet God says all these things—inanimate objects—are witnesses of the covenant promises of His people.

Is it therefore necessary for a man and woman to have other human witnesses present when they exchange vows? The answer is no. But it is certainly advisable, especially

because man's governments require it to be "legal," and such requirement does not violate God's law. Some will argue this point, believing it is not a binding marriage without human witnesses. But for further proof, consider other vows not related to marriage. Does God only hold us to fulfill vows made in the presence of other human witnesses, or are all of our private vows binding just as well?

That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth (Deuteronomy 23:23).

Perhaps this only applies to vows spoken out loud and heard by at least one other person. But no, notice the example of the private vow Hannah made to God:

And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head. And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli marked her mouth. Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; *only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard*: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken (1 Samuel 1:11–13).

Eli did not know what she was saying, or even that she was making a vow. No other human being was witness to her vow. Yet it is certain that God held her to her word. God Himself was witness to her promise, and she was obligated to perform it. Likewise, marriage vows are no different. They are just as binding, even without other human witnesses present to hear them. God is witness! This means that even if an eligible man and woman stand before God in absolute privacy and exchange vows of marriage, they will certainly be bound by God. They will never be able to claim later it was not a "legal" ceremony. But as we have already stated, this is not recommended, because we should always strive to avoid all appearance of evil, and a wedding without human witnesses might easily leave of cloud upon the couple in the eyes of others, and that should be avoided if at all possible.

Can Man Authorize Divorce?

If a man-made government has no authority to create marriages, can it have any authority to annul or divide marriages? Of course not. Jesus Christ said:

But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And

they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. . . .* And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery (Mark 10:6–9, 11–12) [emphasis mine].

What does it mean then when one partner demands to break the marriage and obtains a court-ordered "divorce decree" granting that he or she is no longer married? To God, it means nothing. What He bound together when He made them one flesh is bound for life, man's usurpation notwithstanding.

Yet many in God's church still seem to get confused about what divorce really means. It is not the intent of this letter to delve into the technicalities of divorce and remarriage. We have many articles and recorded sermons that cover those principles thoroughly. But keep in mind that, to God, divorce happens immediately from the time of a breach of contract. If one marriage partner refuses to continue honoring his/her promises, that marriage vow becomes broken. Note that the marriage vow includes not only "forsaking all others"—not having sexual relations with anyone else—but also loving and supporting the marriage and making it work. It involves both promises! So even if one never has illicit sexual relations with anyone else, if he/she refuses to continue living with, loving, and supporting that spouse, it is a violation of the wedding vow! And if one partner refuses to make the marriage work, the other will certainly not be able to do it on his/her own. It takes two to tango. This is the situation that faced God, when His wife—ancient Israel—violated her vow to honor and to obey Him. Once she refused to come back to Him, it was impossible for the marriage to work. God was willing, but His wife was not. Therefore, the result was a breach of contract, and that marriage was put asunder.

And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery *I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce . . .* (Jeremiah 3:8) [emphasis mine].

God divorced Israel because she refused to honor her marriage vows. He had no choice. But actually, the divorce happened as soon as Israel turned from her vow and refused to honor her promise. God only later gave her a "*bill*" of divorce. But the actual divorce in God's eyes happens *immediately* when the bound marriage is put asunder! Divorce is the *automatic* result of broken marriage vows, when one or both refuse to work things out and serve their marriage.

But note very carefully that a bill of divorce never gives those mates freedom to go out and marry anyone else. God bound them for life! Even in a state of divorce—repudiation of their vows—they are still bound by God. This is simply proven by God's own actions after His divorce from Israel. Even after He gave her a bill of divorce, He stated:

Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the LORD. Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for *I am married unto you*: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion (Jeremiah 3:13–14) [emphasis mine].

Even after the divorce, God stated He was still married—bound for life—and appealed to His estranged wife to come back and fulfill her marriage vows. The state of divorce could have been rectified by both coming back and agreeing to honor the original covenant. Israel never did choose to honor her covenant properly. Even so, God was still bound to her until death. It was that same God who divested Himself of His glory, became born as a man, and then died. By the death of Jesus Christ, He became free to marry spiritual Israel—the Church. It was not His divorce from ancient Israel that freed Him. Only His own death freed Him (and her) from that Old Covenant marriage.

Therefore, when one party separates and refuses to return to the marriage, it is automatically a state of divorce. It needs no piece of paper from a human government to make it a divorce. The breach of promise *creates* the state of divorce. The divorce has already happened long before a "divorce decree" is ever issued.


Keep in mind also that man's governments are only interested in dividing physical property. Divorce to them is like dissolving a business partnership and deciding who gets what assets of the former company. It is all about the physical mammon held by the marriage partners. Many in God's church who have been deserted by a husband or wife have worried that they should not file divorce papers to protect their assets, because God hates divorce. But again, this only shows a lack of real understanding of what divorce is and when divorce happens. Once the wife is abandoned by her husband, he has put that marriage asunder, and in God's eyes, they are already in a state of divorce. Filing legal papers with a human government to try and protect property rights is not the real divorce, even if they might think it is. Again, man has no vested right to be able to create or to destroy a marriage bond, and he never will have such authority.

The confines of this letter does not permit opportunity to address other principles affecting marriage, like the significance of betrothal, both physical and spiritual, but we hope to cover that and other principles at another time.

The people of God must understand these fundamentals of marriage. Even if one never marries in this physical life, the foundational rules provide a wonderful glimpse into the thinking of God, and touch so many aspects of His perfect spiritual law. Even though marriage is an institution of flesh for the world, the called of God have the priceless opportunity to grasp the spiritual significance, as it underlies the very fabric of God's master plan for the salvation of all humanity.

If we grasp these spiritual concepts, we not only can avoid falling into error by absorbing Egyptian and Babylonian perversions, but can find real fulfillment in the knowledge of how great and glorious is that God who is coming soon to take the Church as His beloved Bride.

Yours with deep affection in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jon W. Brisby