

# G P S

## For Grandparents, Parents and Seniors

By Rick Shrader

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### The Five Phases of Parenting (Phase 2)

**Note:** This series will consist of five phases: Created-parenting, Pre-parenting, Parenting, Post-parenting, and Grand-parenting. Each of these phases will have four sections.

#### Second Phase: Pre-Parenting (series articles 5-8)

##### Section 2. The Engagement Stage—Covenant (art. #6)

“Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt. 19:4-6).

##### Marriage is a Covenant

Marriage began in the garden of Eden before the fall. When Adam said, “This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” he was making a total commitment to the woman God had made for him. “Therefore,” he concluded, “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife” (notice the word “wife”).

Biblical covenants. Covenants are serious business with God. The biblical covenants are sometimes called conditional and unconditional, or bilateral and unilateral. Well-known biblical covenants are the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the New covenant. A covenant could be made between God and mankind or between people individually. Marriage is a biblical covenant between a man and a woman.

Biblical descriptions. Jacob said to Laban, “Come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me” (Gen. 31:44). This human agreement shows that a covenant was a witness to their promise. Also, regarding marriage, Proverbs describes unfaithfulness on the woman’s part as one who, “Who forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God” (Prov. 2:17). Unfaithfulness on the man’s part to-

ward his wife, Malachi describes as, “With whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal. 2:14).

Modern descriptions of marriage. Marriage has become so violated today that many ignore it altogether. The Bible still calls sex before and outside the marriage covenant sin. Only the marriage bed is “undefiled, but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4). The Roman church calls marriage a sacrament as if the vows are made to the church. Civil government calls marriage a contract, which can be broken at any time. The Bible makes marriage a life-long covenant with God as witness. That covenant is effective the moment a man and a woman give their consent in public vows. In any event, marriage is God’s creation law for all people.

##### The Pre-Marriage Promise

We call this time engagement but the Bible’s term is espousal or betrothal. The biblical term was more permanent than ours, but each could be broken for certain reasons. Marriage has always had two parts: the consent and the consummation. The consent is the vows and the consummation is the physical union.

The biblical promise. In biblical times, the parents usually made an agreement, along with their children, to marry. This betrothal, when it was made, was the consent, or the vows, and was considered permanent. The consummation would follow sometimes years afterward. Lenski explains, “We should understand the betrothal in the Jewish not the American sense. It was virtually marriage and lacked only that the bridegroom takes his bride to his home. The vows of the marriage were made at the betrothal, which was always public, and none were needed when the groom took away his bride” (on Luke 2:5).

A broken promise. In biblical times, a broken promise, especially by unfaithfulness sometime between the betrothal and the eventual consummation, demanded a “putting away” or divorce. Joseph thought that is what had happened with Mary when she was with child. Though she

could have been stoned for her supposed adultery (Deut. 22:23-24), God had made provision for putting her away (Deut. 24:1-4). This was necessary because Joseph thought she had broken her covenant vows.

In our time, the engagement period is not the official consent, or vow. Broken engagements happen often, whether privately or publicly, without any consequences. This is a better arrangement and is often necessary for various reasons.

A human promise. Our engagement period is a promise between a man and a woman to come to the marriage altar sometime soon. Even this period should be one step in a multi-step process for a Christian single. A church youth group (or class) is good because a young person (let's say a girl) socializes with a variety of Christian boys. Some are good and some are not. Out of the good group, perhaps much later, she may agree to "date" one of those boys. This may be brief if she sees quickly that he is not a boy she could be serious about or it may last a good while. Out of that process, perhaps much later, these two may become engaged. Sometime later they plan to marry. Even then, she may see something that shows her this is not the boy to marry and she breaks the engagement.

This whole process is good because a) a believer should only marry another believer, b) even a believer may not be the person you should marry, and c) the arrangement can be broken at any time without penalty, including the last period of engagement. As the saying goes, "He fell in love with a dimple and made the mistake of marrying the whole girl." A boy or girl will always put on the best of manners and deportment while dating (some call this time "the tingles"). It is not until the real life of marriage begins that one may see the rest of that person. We're not talking about intimacy, which should never be discovered until marriage, but about getting to know a person as much as possible. After marriage, the two blend together into a single life.

### **The Modern Covenant**

Consent and consummation have been the norm for hundreds of years. Christopher Ash says, "It is precisely this bipolarity of publicity (the wedding) and intimacy (the honeymoon) that gives to marriage its stability and security" (in *Marriage* 226).

The marriage altar. Whereas in biblical times the consent (vows) were given earlier at the betrothal and the consummation followed much later, our consent is given at a marriage ceremony, and the consummation takes place immediately after during the honeymoon. The vows (consent) are necessary and make the marriage official. When the couple both pledge "I do," they are officially married, both legally and spiritually. These vows should not be trivial or made to suit each person. These vows are being made with God as witness and He intends for both persons to keep these for life. The Church of England, for example,

has traditional vows (since 1662) that must be said or the couple will not be officially married (Church of England official site accessed Oct, 2023). Since marriage is part of the creation order, God intends it for all human beings and limits it to one man and one woman. This is why Christians understand the importance of both the legal marriage license (for all people) and the religious Christian vows of believers before their God.

The father's role. Paul, as the spiritual father of the church at Corinth, wrote, "For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). Also, "So then he who gives her in marriage does well" (1 Cor. 7:38). In biblical times, the father played an important role in marriage. He officially betrothed his daughter to another man in that ceremony. Our modern marriage incorporates a less official custom of the father walking his daughter down the aisle and "giving her away" to a young man. This is often preceded by the custom of that young man asking the father's permission to marry his daughter. Every father who has been in those circumstances knows the seriousness of those customs. You are transferring the headship of your daughter to another man for life.

God as witness. Proverbs calls the marriage covenant of the young woman, "the covenant of her God" (Prov. 2:17). A minister performing a marriage ceremony ought to remind the couple that God is witnessing their sacred vows to one another. Norman Geisler said, "From these passages [Mal 2:14; Prov 2:17] it is evident that marriage is not only a covenant, but also a covenant of which God is witness. God instituted marriage, and he witnesses the vows. They are made 'before God'" (*Ethics*, 301).

A young Christian man and Christian woman should understand the seriousness of the marriage covenant and vows. There is a reason for the process of becoming engaged and eventually getting married. The Christian marriage is greater than the non-Christian marriage because the Christian man and woman want to serve God together. The love is there and must be, but married life is also commitment, partnership, companionship, and a growing together in service to God. Choose wisely.