



Lesson 3: The Covenant Future

Dear friends,

The relationship between past covenant and future expectation, so central to this chapter, became apparent to me only a few years ago. I was asked to conduct a wedding in Wesley Seminary's chapel. Somewhat unusually, the ceremony was to include a short sermon. I knew that the congregation would include people who seldom if ever darken a church door, and I wondered what I might say about both marriage and religion that they would find meaningful. Of course, it is no great innovation to compare the relationship between a wife and a husband to our relationship with God; the Bible itself does so in several places (e.g., in Paul's reference to the church as "the bride of Christ"). Still, it wasn't until I thought about the "eschatological" character of marriage that the sermon really came together. Let me quote you part of what I said that day.

It is the double helix of being and doing, of feeling and acting, that both authors [Paul and James] would affirm, a balance especially when it comes to love that modern people so often forget. According to George Bernard Shaw, "When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part." To the contrary, Mr. Shaw, there is in fact nothing in the wedding ceremony about feelings. Of course, we know that M. and B. feel deeply for one another, but this service is not so much an acknowledgment of those feelings, a description of how things are, as it the embracing of a vision of how things should and shall be.

Like religion -- the reign of God, the New Jerusalem -- marriage is a utopian vision of entire mutuality, perfect love, a promised land toward which a couple is continually traveling. Like religion, it is a higher call that challenges, that unites, and that humanizes. And it is in the doing of love that the feeling of love abides and grows. Love without works cannot long love sustain.

A woman once sought counsel from Dr. George W. Crane, the psychologist, confiding that she hated her husband and intended to divorce him. "I want to hurt him all I can," she declared firmly.

"Well, in that case," said Dr. Crane, "I advise you to start showering him with compliments. [In this and other ways, treat him as though you love him.] When you have become indispensable to him, when he thinks you love him devotedly, then start the divorce action. That is the way to hurt him."

Some months later the wife returned to report that all was going well. She had followed the suggested course. "Good," said Dr. Crane. "Now's the time to file for divorce." "Divorce!" the woman said indignantly. "Never. I love my husband!"

I expect that, once in a while anyway, M. and B. will fall short of the utopian ideal of marriage. One will act selfishly; one will be unkind. It will not be a fall from grace. It will be only a reminder that complete love is not a state that lies behind but a goal that yet lies ahead. Today is not the realization of marriage, it is the beginning of marriage.

It is easy to be cynical -- especially here in Washington, where even "Mr. Smith" had a hard time sustaining his idealism. Of course, people fall short of utopian perfection. Religious people sin, some magnificently, and married people sometimes fail to act in love. Perhaps if we were faultless, we would not require ideals.

Our faults do not invalidate our visions; instead, they necessitate them. They call us to something more, something higher, something better. Not of maintaining some impossibly romanticized view of this reality, but of creating an ever better reality together, before God.

Marriage, like religion, is an undertaking of faith. It is risky investing in a dream, an ideal, a vision. It matters a lot what the vision is and with whom one is sharing it. But we are here today because we believe with you in the particular aspiration and partnership of your marriage. We celebrate it, we honor it, we affirm it, and we will continue beyond today to support it.

I am confident in you, for I have seen your love by your works, and I know your shared vision. May God bless you in your pilgrimage together, being married while ever becoming married.

If you've read the second half of Chapter Three, you'll recognize the influence this sermon had on my subsequent thinking (especially obvious on page 44). Consideration of the future dimension of all biblical covenants was a natural extension of the ideas quoted above. The analogy with marriage also provides a useful way into the discussion of "realized" and "future" eschatologies in Chapter Seven. We might say that we are "Christians while ever becoming Christian."

Grace & peace,

Craig