

Du Plessis, Amanda L
North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus)

The covenant as fundamental building block of marriage

ABSTRACT

Marriage is an institution of God, a social institution, a multidimensional experience, as well as an intimate personal relationship between a man and a woman. In the Bible the marital relationship is used to describe the covenant relationship between God and human beings. The covenant relationship between God and human beings gives man a secure and safe space where he/she can grow to spiritual and emotional maturity in God, through Jesus Christ. When spouses understand and accept the covenant as a fundamental building block in their marriage, and live accordingly, it creates a profound union and intimacy. Marriage then becomes a safe haven in which spouses can grow to spiritual and emotional wholeness. The question this article explores is how the covenant as the pastoral point of departure may contribute to marriage pastorate. The empirical research has shown that marriage counselling is currently executed reactively, rather than pro-actively.

ABSTRAK

DIE VERBOND AS FUNDAMENTELE BOUSTEEN VIR DIE HUWELIK

Die huwelik is 'n instelling van God, 'n sosiale instelling, multidimensionele ervaring, asook 'n intieme persoonlike verhouding tussen 'n man en 'n vrou. In die Bybel word die huweliksverhouding gebruik om die verbondsverhouding tussen God en die mens te beskryf. Die verbondsverhouding tussen God en die mens gee aan die mens sekuriteit en veilige ruimte waarbinne die mens tot volwassenheid in God deur Jesus kan groei. Wanneer huweliksgenote die aspekte van die verbond as fundamentele bousteen in hulle huwelik begryp en daarvolgens leef, ontstaan 'n diepe eenwording en intimiteit. Die huwelik word dan 'n veilige ruimte waarbinne beide huweliksgenote geestelik en emosioneel kan groei tot heelheid. Die vraag wat in hierdie artikel ondersoek word, is op watter manier die verbond as pastorale vertrekpunt kan bydra tot die huwelikspastoraat. Die empiriese ondersoek het aangedui dat die huwelikspastoraat tans eerder reaktief as pro-aktief geskied.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pastorate could possibly operate from four categorical choice options, namely bipolar (Heitink), change (Gerkin), communication (Clinebell), and koinonia (Louw). According to Louw (1984:22-26), eschatology can function as a fifth angle in order to resolve and correct the deficiencies and obscurities in each of the other options. However, according to Van Rensburg (1996:153) this approach cannot escape from unilateralism and incompleteness; therefore the covenant, as another point of departure in the pastorate, is advocated by him. The covenant as paradigm can analyse and evaluate all five categorical angles of approach mentioned and correct them where necessary (Van Rensburg, 1996:153). The impact of the covenant as a paradigm for pastoral care is further described by Van Rensburg and Hoffman (2003). According to Van

Rensburg (1996:153) the covenant as a paradigm is *chosen*, as the covenant and predestination form the two central structures in the Bible and Reformed teaching. It is clear from a doctrinal perspective that the covenant and predestination together form the most comprehensive set of theological principles, encompassing all other supposed biblical principles. A paradigmatic choice for the covenant avoids the necessity to choose one biblical principle at the expense of the others, and fragmentation of the poimetic is avoided (Van Rensburg 1996:153). From this point of view, the covenant has a more extensive impact on pastoral care than any other paradigm (Van Rensburg & Hoffman, 2003:239). According to Van Rensburg and Hoffman (2003:250) pastoral care will serve its purpose more effectively, the closer it is to the covenant relationship.

Helberg (1996:223) emphasises the pivotal place of the covenant in Reformed theology. In the 1960s Eichardt convincingly showed that the theology of the Old Testament rests on the covenant concept. Helberg further refers to the parallel between biblical covenants and old Middle East vassal agreements. In the Reformed tradition the covenant between God and his people is separated from its historical bounds, and thus the covenant is a timeless abstraction (Helberg, 1996:223). This abstract concept of the covenant is used as a cardinal concept to describe the nature of the relationship between God and human beings. Paul uses the marital relationship to describe the covenant relation between God and his church (cf. Eph. 5:21-23). Therefore the covenant can, and should be used as cardinal concept to describe the nature of the marital relationship between husband and wife.

Against the background of these introductory remarks, the focus of this article is to illustrate the impact of the covenant as a paradigm in marriage pastorate. First the nature of the covenant between God and humankind is investigated; and secondly, the nature of the covenant between husband and wife in marriage. In both cases various definitions, the establishment and promises of the covenant, the obligations of the covenant and life in the covenant relationship are considered.

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The covenant as a paradigm has a significant impact on the pastorate, and in marriage pastorate the covenant forms the fundamental building block.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is based on a comparative analysis and interpretation of existing literature about the covenant between God and humankind, and the significance thereof for the marriage. The literature was studied to detect the role (or function) the covenant has in marriage pastorate. Thereafter, the information was empirically tested through a qualitative study that included questionnaires and group discussions¹.

4. THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HUMAN BEINGS

4.1 Covenant definition

The aim of a covenant is to provide a guarantee to a commitment (Helberg, 1996:224). A

1 A limited qualitative empirical study has been done during the presentation of three marriage seminars.

The respondents were requested to complete a questionnaire, followed by group discussion. The first seminar took place in Rustenburg on the 15 January 2011, the second in Potchefstroom on 11 April 2011, and the third in Carletonville on 7 May 2011.

covenant is thus a specialised requirement or undertaking boosted by a self-damning oath or pledge². A covenant between God and the one with whom He made a covenant is defined as follows:

1. "A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man (a human being) that stipulates the conditions of their relationship" (Gundem, 1994:515).
2. "A covenant is an agreement, established between two parties, whereby a bond is made between the parties and whereby they, standing on equal basis, mutually undertake certain commitments. A covenant between God and man (human beings) is a conditional promise, sealed by blood sovereignly administrated by God (Gen. 17:9-11), with blessings for those who obey the conditions of the covenant and curses for those who disobey its conditions (Ex. 19:5-6). The covenant is God's plan and pledge for accomplishing the redemption of sinning man" (An, 2001:59).
3. The covenant of grace is the particular form of the divine dispensation in which the Triune God is bound by covenant and oath to the believers and their seed, to be their Father, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Through the covenant, human beings are united with God as His bondservants in order to do His will. It is only due to man's unbelief and disobedience to the covenant that he can be lost (Postma, 1980:9).
4. Van Rensburg and Hoffman (2003:241) refer to the covenant as "wholeness of a relationship of community, a state of harmonious equilibrium, balancing all the demands and needs between two parties".

The covenant relationship between God and human beings provides security to man; the certainty that God Himself is bound to the relationship, thus creating a safe environment where man is able to grow towards spiritual and emotional maturity.

Although believers frequently use the term "Covenant God" or "God of the Covenant" and even sing of it in the Totius rendering of Psalm 146, this appellation is not found in the Old Testament (Helberg, 1996:226). In addition to this, in Exodus 3, God refers to Himself as "*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*". In this reference, it is obvious that a strong connection exists with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with whom the covenant was established. It is significant that God reveals Himself in terms of His relationship with people (the Earthly Fathers) and does not describe His relationship with them in covenant terms. The conclusion can be drawn that for God, His relationship with people are of primary importance and different from His relation to things, places and concepts. The term "Covenant God" can easily direct the focus to a more formal, structural sphere and structural requirements and effects, as if God is more interested in the covenant than in man.

4.2 Covenant making and promises

The covenant of God with man (Gen. 15, 17) – also called the covenant of grace – has its deepest roots in the will and goodwill of God to save fallen humanity (Marais, 1977:3). Fundamental to

2 The basis word for covenant is translated from the Hebrew words *Berit* and the Greek word *Diatheke*. *Berit* normally refers to a deed or ritual in the making of a covenant or contractual agreement between parties (Marshall *et al.*, 1996:234). *Diatheke* is the Greek version of *Berit* used in the New Testament. The Greek lexicon offers two words for covenant, namely *Diatheke* and *Sintheke*. According to Tenney (1967:186) *Sintheke* is indicative to a covenant whereby two parties agree to the conclusion there off. Van Gemeren (1997:746) indicates that *Diatheke* refers to the word "testament" in the Septuagint. It indicates the monopoleuric character in the covenant, because God independently from man and initiated only by Himself, enters into covenant with man. In this process *Diatheke* includes man only on his reaction on acceptance of the covenant or the rejection there off. Man's reaction makes it dupleuric (Parker, 2008:15). The term *Berit* is referring to a sovereign and merciful engagement from God in relationship with His people.

the covenant is the powerful promise of God. Postma (1980:9) explains the promise as follows: “The covenant of grace is the promise of salvation in the form of a covenant. The Scripture teaches that every covenant of God with man is nothing but a promise given in the intensified form of a covenant.”

The promise of the covenant is paramount and is indicative of its monopoleuric character (Marshall *et al.*, 1996:235; Postma, 1980:10). The promise includes salvation for time and eternity. The covenant gives the disproportionate dimensions of God’s wisdom, the breadth of His love and the length of His patience and loyalty (Van Rensburg, 1996:153). In the covenant with Abraham the divine gift is evident (Helberg, 1996:225). In Genesis 15 God confirms His promises to Abraham through the ritual of the contractual model for the confirmation of a covenant. Walking between the pieces of the animals, the parties undertake to honour the agreement. The one who breaks the agreement can be cut in half just as the animals. In this case, Abraham does not pass between the pieces, but only the embodiment of God’s presence – a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch – performs this ritual. The covenant is therefore a fixed security whereby God alone commits Himself to the execution thereof (Marshall *et al.*, 1996:235; Snyman, 2010:131). For sinful mankind it is totally impossible to offer payment for his/her sins; and God, through His grace, decided to provide a Mediator so that mankind could receive righteousness as a gift (Marais, 1977:4). God Himself, in the person of his Son, made the sacrifice and in this way Jesus Christ became the Mediator and Saviour, and thus a new covenant came into being. In terms of the contractual ritual Jesus was “cut in pieces”, on the one hand due to the unfaithfulness of human beings, and on the other hand due to the fixed assurance that God is faithful to the covenant relationship. Through the crucifixion Christ became the perfect sacrifice for the new covenant (cf. Heb. 8).

4.3 Covenant obligations

Closely associated with the promise of the covenant are the covenant obligations or demands of faith and repentance (cf. Gen. 15:6 & 17:9). All covenants have two sides. In its progress the covenant is therefore dupleuric or double-sided. The promise always comes first and faith is required to accept the promise – the appropriation of the promise. Every person within the covenant therefore receives not only the promise, but also the requirement of faith and repentance (Postma, 1980:10). Without faith and repentance the promise will not be fulfilled. The sin of Israel, among other things, lay in their refusal to acknowledge that a relationship with God also brings *obligations* (Hoepfner, 2009:16). God connects the promised salvation to the promise through the bond of faith. Because of unbelief, human beings separate what God has joined together and disconnects the promised salvation from the covenant promise. Such a human being will not participate in the promised salvation and he loses what God has already given to him through the promise (Postma, 1980:13). The covenant relationship is therefore a truly personal relationship, not just a superficial or formal ritual, but a deeply intimate experience (Helberg, 1996:230). A human being’s heart is moved by the covenant relationship. It is the personal nature of the covenant relationship that gives this relationship a reciprocal (dupleuric) character. God’s relationship with man requires a response. Because the relationship is personal, it cannot exist unilaterally, so God sometimes makes explicit demands regarding the covenant. The conditions are in unison with God’s relationship, and consequently the conditions are not merely impersonal and legalistic by nature (Helberg, 1996:231).

4.4 Living in covenant

According to Van der Merwe (2004:88), the covenant is not just a matter of perspective or pure and true definition. Rather it is a living comfort and hope for those who fall into sin because of

weakness, so that they don't doubt the mercy of God and remain in sin (Baptismal formula). The covenant of God represents a joining of extreme disharmonies – between God and sinner a unique bond of union is established. The covenant serves to bring about salvation that comes from the Lord alone and it becomes a divine reality in the life of human beings, through which they can live and die (Van der Merwe, 2008:88). The covenant relationship opens the way so that man has both the courage to state his case and his struggles to God through earnest lamentations, and the grace to give praise and obedience to God. In light of this, breach of the covenant is therefore perceived as a matter of sorrow, while restoration of the covenant cultivates joy (Van Rensburg & Hoffman, 2003:242). Man in a covenant relationship with God has the certainty that he is reconciled with God, and the Holy Spirit creates in him the openness to have an intimate personal relationship with God. The emphasis in the New Testament is that God, through His Spirit, is present in the hearts of believers, and because of this human beings encounter the full reality of God's love and they can rejoice in the intimate contact with God.

5. THE NATURE OF THE COVENANT BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN IN MARRIAGE

Currently, Western secular circles increasingly regard traditional marriage as obsolete and more voices are raised for alternatives (Collins, 2005:476; Adams, 1983:ix). Consequently, research is in progress to investigate the possibility to link a fixed term to a marriage relationship, after which the parties will have the option to renew the marriage or to dissolve it (Lowery, 2002:6). Marriage without the necessary commitment creates an undesirable situation. Considering the sinful nature of human beings, it is inevitable that problems in the marriage will occur at some point. Where there is no deeper commitment, the marriage is without hope and divorce sometimes seems the easier choice. In light of this, the church must take on the responsibility to teach and equip people regarding marriage and especially regarding the covenant as the fundamental building block of marriage. Without a covenant relationship with God, human beings are without hope and future (cf. Eph. 2:12-13). Marriage is also without hope and future if spouses do not understand their relationship in context of the covenant and do not live accordingly. A covenant between husband and wife, based on the covenant between God and human beings, gives true hope to the marriage relationship (cf. Heb. 6:13-20), and brings God as witness and protector into their relationship (Lowery, 2002:82).

5.1 Covenant definition

The covenant between a man and a woman in marriage is defined as follows:

- The right attitude towards marriage as a covenant is to believe that marriage is based on a covenant relationship that God established as an unbreakable, fulfilling and lifelong relationship between a man and a woman; which is distinguishable from all other relationships in terms of an attitude of constant unconditional love, reconciliation and sexual purity, while the spouses continually strive towards purposeful growth in the covenant relationship (Lowery, 2002:70).
- Marriage is an institution of God and a complex multidimensional experience (De Wet, 2005:11; Collins, 2005:476).
- Marriage is a social institution, as well as an intimate personal relationship (Ponzetti & Mutch 2006:216).
- According to Louw (2005:45), the husband-wife relationship creates a space in which God's attitude, his grace and constancy should be demonstrated and manifested in a unique way. Hence, the fact that marriage is considered as a permanent, unbreakable commitment of love.

The Jews regarded marriage as an obligatory religious ritual that all the Jewish laws endorsed. For Jews the ultimate success of the covenant rested on marriage and reproduction (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:216). In Greco-Roman times marriage was seen as essential to the sound basis of society and social order. The central expectation of marriage was reproduction. The government laid down marriage laws and the institutionalisation of marriage was of central importance in Roman civilisation (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:217). Roughly up to the time of the Reformation, the Christian view regarding marriage was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Marriage was seen as a natural, contractual and sacramental entity. However, they believed that celibacy had greater value than marriage. During the Reformation, Luther and Calvin mostly agreed with the view of the Roman Catholic Church regarding marriage; but in addition, they also saw marriage as the solution to human sexuality (cf. 1 Cor. 7:9; Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:223). Louw (2005:44) states that marriage is not a brothel that has to fulfil the sexual needs of the partners. He refers to sexual intercourse (*koitus*) as an act of personal love-communication, which is intrinsically part of the development of human identity.³ Marriage is thus seen as a safe space for demonstrating salvation, reconciliation and forgiveness (Louw, 2005:45). From the eighteenth century, changes such as longer life expectancy and better living conditions revolutionised the perception of marriage and attraction – love and affection were recognised as *sin qua non* in the marriage relationship. Since the start of the previous century, the concept of romantic love has been over-emphasised and marriage became more of a private, rather than a social matter (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:223). However, Christians share a rich tradition which aspires to a deeper meaning in the marriage bond and this is why the fundamental value of the covenant in marriage is emphasised. In essence the covenant is about relationship. Christianity is based on the covenant promise of God and fellow-believers. The legally binding contracts that dominate all agreements in contemporary society, cloud the understanding of the covenant as fundamental building block in marriage. Yet, it is the duty of the church to educate prospective wedding couples in the covenant aspect of Christian marriage.

5.2 Covenant making and promises

Genesis 2:18-25 provides the foundation for entering into a marriage relationship and five key features can be distinguished, namely: a common desire, appreciation, commitment, trust and conviction (Bellesi, 2007:24). In the New Testament Jesus and Paul quoted Genesis 2:24 as a fundamental building block of marriage (cf. Mt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). Leaving, cleaving and union are three pivotal aspects emphasised in the marital relationship (Lowery, 2002:67). The success of the marriage depends on the strength of the parties' covenant promises to each other, and their covenant relationship with God. In this regard Lowery (2002:69) is quoted:

“I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them – it was that promise.”

According to Palmer (1972:639), the significant difference between a contract and a covenant is the following:

3 Louw (2005:44) explains as follows: The word sexual intercourse (*Jādā*) suggests personal knowledge of the other. *Jādā* (*koitus*) is therefore more than just sexual intercourse; it describes a personal process of communication whereby the humane of the other person is unveiled. Sexual intercourse is meant to focus on treating the other person in a dignified manner and to establish a bond. For example whenever a man has had sexual intercourse with a woman, he must take responsibility for her. He cannot reject her nor can he ostracise her (cf. Deut. 22:28-30).

“Contracts deal with things, covenants with people. Contracts engage the services of people; covenants engage persons. Contracts are made for a stipulated period of time; covenants are forever. Contracts can be broken, with material loss to the contracting parties; covenants cannot be broken, but if violated, they result in personal loss and broken hearts. Contracts are secular affairs and belong to the marketplace; covenants are sacred affairs and belong to the hearth, the temple, or the church. Contracts are best understood by lawyers, civil and ecclesiastical; covenants are appreciated better by poets and theologians. Contracts are witnessed by people with the state as guarantor; covenants are witnessed by God with God as guarantor. Contracts can be made by children who know the value of a penny; covenants can be made only by adults who are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually mature.”

The marriage covenant is personal and relationship-oriented – not self-oriented. It provides security and a safe haven, and contains the promise of strength (Lowery, 2002:86). The Christian marriage is thus distinguishable from secular marriages in terms of the quality of their covenant promises. Christian marriages are distinguished both by the quality of love and the commitment to care – based on the covenant promise. According to Adams (1983:23) a marriage begins at the wedding ceremony when a husband and a wife make wedding vows to each other before God. Just as the covenant between God and human beings, the covenant between husband and wife rests on a promise. Marriage is not merely the signing of a contract. A legal contract is concerned with rules and regulations, and can be broken when the conditions are not met. A covenant is concerned with a relationship. When marital partners understand the full impact of a covenant relationship and live accordingly, they will experience ways and depths of love for each other which they never thought were possible.

5.3 Covenant obligations

The covenant of God with man has its deepest roots in the will and goodwill of God to save fallen humanity (cf. 4.2; Gen. 15, 17; Marais, 1977:3). This is another aspect of the Christian marriage which uniquely distinguishes it from secular marriages. The covenant marriage allows the spouses the opportunity and supports them to grow towards spiritual and emotional healing in God through Jesus Christ. Although the Bible describes successful marriages (e.g. Boas and Rut), there is also evidence of marital conflict (e.g. David and Michal; Collins, 2005:476). Though these cases are mentioned in the Bible, marital problems *per se* are not analysed or discussed. Intimacy in the marriage is created when spouses live according to their covenant promises and obligations. This encompasses mutual understanding, faith, openness and respect, with the purpose to love and accept each other unconditionally. Intimacy in marriage is linked to the degree and quality of the spouses’ spiritual and psychological maturity (Louw, 2011). Stress in marriage is often a symptom of deeper emotional baggage and unspoken, suppressed feelings. Spiritual and psychological immaturity includes unfounded fears, selfishness, and lack of love, being unforgiving, anger, communication problems and behavioural problems. The covenant relationship between God and human beings creates a safe space for human beings to grow towards spiritual and emotional maturity. An understanding of the covenant aspect, as fundamental building block in marriage, allows spouses support and space for spiritual and emotional growth. Van Rensburg (1996:154) points out that the kingdom of God is the domain within which the divine covenant and promises are to be concretised. Evidence of the kingdom is thus constructed through pastoral care when spouses are guided to salvation in Christ and thus find true unity in marriage. This is where the will of God, as included in His council and promised in His covenant, is put into operation. Ultimately the covenant is mainly a relationship-oriented reality. König (1991:17) describes it as follows: “We are already joined to each other

in the covenant with God. Our relationship with each other is defined through our relationship with God.” A deeper bond between a husband and his wife is created by the understanding of this concept. Wholeness is found along the road of restored relations – more so when the marriage relationship is founded in the covenant relationship between God and human beings (Van Rensburg, 1996:157).

Stoop (2007:376) refers to research done by Barna regarding spiritual intimacy in marriage. His findings show that the divorce rate among marriage couples who daily worship God together, is only 1 in 1 100. This is amazing in light of the fact that the overall divorce rate shows that one in two marriages ends in divorce⁴ (Famsa, 2011). Marriage couples, who understand and live by the spirit of the covenant, will not only experience growth in their relationship with God, but their marriage relationship will also deepen. Van Rensburg and Hoffman (2003:242) indicate that the dupleuristic nature of the covenant assumes reciprocity in the pastoral process; whereby the spouses take responsibility in the pastoral process to solve problems, and do everything necessary to facilitate healing in the relationship.

5.4 Living in covenant

The conclusion can be drawn that the biggest responsibility of spouses is to love each other unconditionally, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (cf. Eph. 5:25). Thus, they will grow in complete union (intimacy) with each other and with God. To live within the covenant as a fundamental building block of marriage provides the spouses a safe, secure and peaceful environment not only in times when everything is good, but also in times when conflict arises. Jesus experienced something similar in the Garden of Gethsemane (cf. Mt. 26:36-46). The cup is a metaphor of Jesus’ discomfort. Jesus’ complete surrender to God became apparent when He uttered the words, “*Yet not as I will, but as you will*” (NIV). With this, Jesus became the Mediator for the new covenant that was established between God and human beings (Hagner, 1995:783). Covenant love is so strong that it does not exclude discomfort, but recovery and healing can also be found along this path. Therefore, for spouses to live within a covenant relationship with each other is a matter of faith for *both*. The endurance and stability of this relationship is not determined by the inconsistency of emotions, sexuality or love, but by the faithfulness of God and His grace (Louw, 2005:51). The survival of the marriage is then a choice to stay true to the covenant promises.

Balswick and Balswick (2006:38-39) distinguish four core principles for the covenant marriage, namely the agreement – to love and to be loved; grace – to forgive and to be forgiven; empowerment – to serve and to be served; and intimacy – to know and to be known. These principles also become manifest in the covenant between God and human beings.

The similarities in the covenant relationship between God and human beings on the one side, and the covenant marriage between a man and a woman on the other side, are remarkable in that both are initiatives of love inviting a response and creating a relationship. Just as God’s covenant of grace is secured by an oath, so the essence of the marriage covenant is the vow of consent – a vow that protects and guarantees the relationship. The existence of both are based on faithfulness of the parties; both include the promise of blessing to those remaining faithful to their covenant obligations and both require self-sacrifice (Lowery, 2002:xvi).

4 Yarber (2009:918) writes in a review of the book by Nock *et al.*, *Covenant Marriage*: “*The movement to reclaim tradition in marriage* that the city Louisiana in the United States of America has already declared the covenant marriage legal in 1979 as part of the marital law. This is done in an effort to reduce the high divorce rate. This implicates that future bridal couples have the choice to be wedded according to the covenant values and before a couple can be divorced, proof must be given of efforts to resolve the marriage conflict.”

6. EMPIRICAL STUDY

For the purpose of this research the qualitative method was used. Qualitative research makes use of the logic of the praxis (Strydom, 1999:14), which makes it easier to determine the emotional state of humans in certain situations (Lindeque, 2006:197). Qualitative research emphasises the importance to understand the social order and the context thereof (Neuman, 1997:330). The meaning of a certain chain of events depends to a great extent on the context in which they occurs (Steyn & Lotter, 2006:106).

A limited empirical study was conducted at three marriage seminars, where the concept of the covenant as a fundamental building block for marriage was shared with those attending. The participants were Christian believers, active members in their Church activities, and they have shared testimonies of their personal relationships with God. The participants were all married in the church, where they made vows to each other before God and the congregation. The first group consisted of four couples. Two couples, who were married for more than fifteen years, had received intensive marriage counselling during the preceding three years, which resulted in a dramatic change in their marriage relationship, as well as in their relationship with God. The second group consisted of five couples in their first marriages. The third group consisted of eight couples of which five couples were in their first marriages. Overall the marriages ranged from 14 months to 34 years.

Even though intensive empirical research still needs to be done, and granted the fact that this research was only done on a very small scale, the following conclusions can already be made.

A huge gap exists with regard to pre-marital counselling. Seventy percent of the couples who formed part of the research received no pre-marital counselling. Twenty percent of them said that they had received proper counselling, while the remaining ten percent spent an hour with their pastor to receive counselling prior to their wedding. Ignorance regarding the expectations and demands of married life will inevitably result in problems and needs to be addressed.

Only twenty-five percent of the participants indicated that on previous occasions they had been made aware of the covenant aspects of marriage. For some of the participants the idea of a covenant marriage was completely unfamiliar, because they were of the opinion that a covenant could only exist between God and a human being, and not between people or, for the purpose of this study, between a man and a woman in marriage. A basic consensus was reached concerning the fact that the covenant promise in marriage is a promise before God, a binding contract, a promise to be faithful, a promise of submissiveness of a wife to her husband and a lifelong commitment. It was evident that all the participants had only a vague idea of the covenant aspects and were not aware of the importance of the covenant as the fundamental building block of marriage.

During the group discussion several issues were discussed and the participants agreed on the following:

- Firstly, the importance of the responsibility that wedded couples have towards each other has been pointed out. The phrase "*as Christ*" brings a major paradigm shift in the marital relationship.
- Secondly, the permanency of the marriage relationship, due to the covenant aspects, was discussed. This fact should urge married couples to deal responsibly with conflict, rather than to avoid it. Problems in marriage are no longer seen as the result of conflicting personalities, but as perception blockages that can be resolved. The prejudices regarding the problem can be recognised.
- Thirdly, the view that greater intimacy is possible when marriage couples live according to covenant principles was raised. These principles enable husband and wife to accept

each other unconditionally and emphasise their love for each other, without the fear of rejection.

These three key elements were highlighted, but the many different facets of the covenant still offer opportunity for further exploration. I am of the opinion that, although this was a limited empirical study, it already gives an alarming indication of the broader situation – that contemporary marriage counselling is done on a reactive, rather than on a pro-active basis.

7. CONCLUSION

The marriage relationship is an important relationship among human beings. If the marriage relationship grows and flourishes, it is one of the most fulfilling and satisfying experiences of human existence. If it is unhappy or even static, it can be a source of utmost frustration and unhappiness. God Himself introduced marriage as an institution, because He wanted to create a human model of the covenant relationship Jesus Christ has with his church. In a marriage relationship, which is built on the covenant as fundamental building block, the husband and wife have the opportunity to express God's grace towards each other. Intimacy in the covenant marriage is therefore an expression of grace and hope. It is an unqualified "I do".

The Bible recognises the reality of broken marriages (cf. Mal. 2:13-16), but this does not mean that marriage as an institution has failed. When the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce in order to test Him (cf. Mt. 19:1-12), Jesus answered that it was the hardness of human beings' hearts that destroyed marriages. Marriage, since God Himself determined the foundation thereof, is not merely the implementation of a contract. It is a sacred blood covenant of which God is the witness and guarantor. It is unconditional, unlimited and perpetual – based on trust rather than on terms. It appeals to the characters of those involved, rather than focusing on their comfort, and it is concerned with what they build into it, rather than with what they can get out of it.

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KEY WORDS

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TREFWOORDE

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Volledige kontakbesonderhede:

Dr. Amanda L du Plessis, Na-doktoralegenoot, Vakgroep: Praktiese Teologie, Fakulteit: Teologie, Potchefstroomkampus, Noordwes-Universiteit, Potchefstroom, 2520.

Selfoonnommer: 082-2574533

Werknommer: 018-2991600

E-posadres: Amanda.DuPlessis@nwu.ac.za