WP-21 FAITH IN PRACTICE

What Makes a Marriage? Covenant, Not Cohabitation

STATEMENT

Neither sex nor living together makes a couple married in God's eyes. Biblical marriage is a covenant: publicly vowed, recognized by family and authority, formally committed, and then sealed by consummation, in that order.

Read time **4 min** Sources & resources **5** Series **Faith in Practice** Author **Lee Gregory**

01 ABSTRACT

Many couples today consider themselves "married in our hearts" after years of living together, and some Christians argue that sex itself creates a marriage. This paper examines what Scripture actually treats as marriage, the four elements that appear consistently across the biblical record, and how each translates into practice today.

02 SEX AND COHABITATION ARE NOT MARRIAGE

Genesis 2:24 sets the pattern Jesus and Paul both quote (Matthew 19:5; Ephesians 5:31): a man**leaves** his parents, is **joined** to his wife, and the two become **one flesh**. Three steps: a social transition, a covenant commitment, and consummation.

Sex creates a bond, but not a marriage. Paul says a man joined to a prostitute becomes "one body with her" (1 Corinthians 6:16), quoting Genesis 2:24, yet he calls it sin, not marriage. Under the Law, a man who slept with an unengaged virgin had to pay the bride price and marry her, and her father could still refuse (Exodus 22:16–17). The act created an obligation, not a marriage.

Living together is not marriage either. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "You have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now" (John 4:18). He distinguished plainly between a husband and a live-in partner.

03 FOUR ELEMENTS OF BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

ELEMENT	IN SCRIPTURE	TODAY
Public covenant	"The LORD was the witness… she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant" (Malachi 2:14). The word is *berith*, the same used for God's covenants with Israel (also Proverbs 2:17; Ezekiel 16:8).	Vows spoken publicly before God and witnesses. They are the covenant, not decoration.
Family and social recognition	Rebekah's family consents (Genesis 24:50–58); Laban holds a wedding feast for the community (29:22); Jesus attends the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–2); Paul still assumes a father's role (1 Corinthians 7:36–38).	Seek parents' blessing and counsel, and marry legally. Romans 13:1 makes the state license the modern equivalent of the city gate in Ruth 4.

ELEMENT	IN SCRIPTURE	TODAY
Formal commitment	Bride price (Exodus 22:16–17; Genesis 34:12); Boaz's public declaration before the elders (Ruth 4:9–10); betrothal was so binding that Joseph would have needed a divorce to end it (Matthew 1:19).	A serious engagement: a declared, costly, public commitment, not a trial run.
Consummation	Sex seals the covenant after it is made (Genesis 2:24; Deuteronomy 22:13–21; Song of Songs 4:12; 5:1).	Sex belongs after the wedding, including for engaged couples. "Give honor to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage" (Hebrews 13:4).

The specific forms (shekels, city gates) were cultural. The principles behind them are not.

04 HONOR WITHOUT VETO

Genesis 2:24 says a man "leaves" his parents: marriage forms a new household, and parents do not own the decision. But "honor your father and mother" (Ephesians 6:2) does not expire at adulthood, and choosing a spouse is exactly where honor is most naturally expressed. Where parents are absent or unbelieving, the principle is met by submitting the relationship to other godly counsel: pastors, elders, mature believers.

05 CHOOSING A SPOUSE

Scripture gives clear direction. Do not marry an unbeliever: "Don't team up with those who are unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14); Solomon's foreign wives "turned his heart away from the LORD" (1 Kings 11:3). Avoid the violent, the hot-tempered and those who keep bad company (Proverbs 16:29; 22:24–25; 1 Corinthians 15:33). Look for someone who fears God and obeys His Word (Psalm 119:63), accepts correction (Proverbs 13:18), is faithful with little things and with money (Luke 16:10–12; Proverbs 21:20), and seeks to build a godly home (Proverbs 18:22; 31:10–31). Count the cost before you build (Luke 14:28).

06 SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT

OBSERVATION	DATA & SOURCE	CONFIDENCE
Marriage is a covenant before God	Malachi 2:14; Proverbs 2:17; Ezekiel 16:8. Malachi 2 ↗	HIGH
Cohabitation is not marriage	John 4:16–18.	HIGH
Sex alone does not create marriage	1 Corinthians 6:16; Exodus 22:16–17; Deuteronomy 22:28–29.	HIGH
Family recognition	Genesis 24; Genesis 29:22; Judges 14:2–3; 1 Corinthians 7:36–38.	HIGH
Legal recognition	Ruth 4:9–11; Romans 13:1.	MODERATE
Sex belongs inside marriage	Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9.	HIGH

High = directly measured, or stated plainly in the text. **Moderate** = well-supported, with recognized debate. **Interpretive** = consistent with the text, but depends on how the passage is read.

07 OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

OBJECTION

A piece of paper doesn't make a marriage; commitment does.

RESPONSE

Scripture agrees that the paper is not the point; the covenant is. But the covenant is public, witnessed and recognized by legitimate authority. Refusing that recognition while living as married is the problem.

OBJECTION

Isaac "brought Rebekah into his mother's tent, and she became his wife" (Genesis 24:67), with no ceremony mentioned.

RESPONSE

That verse is the end of a long chapter: a negotiated agreement, family consent, gifts given (24:50–53) and Rebekah's own public assent (24:58). The covenant came first.

OBJECTION

Bride price and parental consent were ancient culture.

RESPONSE

The forms were cultural; the principles (serious, public, recognized commitment) are not. Paul, writing to a Greek city, still assumed family involvement.

08 CONCLUSION

Marriage, biblically, is not a private feeling or a shared address. It is a covenant made before God, publicly vowed, recognized by family and legitimate authority, seriously committed, and then sealed by consummation. Couples who want God's blessing on their union can follow that order with confidence.

> *"This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." Genesis 2:24*

09 FURTHER RESOURCES

SCRIPTURE **Genesis 2:18–25: the first marriage** New Living Translation
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%202%3A18-25&version=NLT

SCRIPTURE **Matthew 19:3–9: Jesus on marriage** New Living Translation
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2019%3A3-9&version=NLT

SCRIPTURE **1 Corinthians 7** New Living Translation
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%207&version=NLT

SCRIPTURE **Proverbs 31:10–31** New Living Translation
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs%2031%3A10-31&version=NLT

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