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Covenant Marriage as a Signal:

Religion and Commitment in Modern America

This paper uses economic signaling theory and religious studies about the pursuit of the sacred to explore the unique meanings covenant married couples attribute to their marriages, as compared to standard married couples. We use quantitative data from a three-wave panel study of newlywed couples and qualitative face-to-face interviews with a sub-set to explore the multidimensionality of religious experiences during the newlywed years. Covenant married couples are far more religious on all dimensions than are standard married couples. They are likely to be evangelical Protestants and fundamentalists who tend to sanctify marriage and demonize divorce. Covenant marriage serves as a potent signal of their personal commitment to God and marriage and their sense of public responsibility to set an example of the sanctity of marriage. The implications are that research on marriage, religion, and social change should incorporate how individuals perceive the public meaning of their intimate relationships.

Introduction

In 1997, Louisiana became the first state to pass covenant marriage legislation and create a two-track marriage system. Couples must choose between covenant or standard marriage. On the surface, covenant marriage serves as a secular state mechanism to filter couples more soberly into marriage, strengthen their marital commitment, and reduce divorce. The law requires premarital counseling, marital counseling, restricted fault-based divorce provisions, and an extended waiting period for divorce. While the law applies to all marrying couples, since its inception, the large majority who elect covenant marriage are primarily conservative evangelical Protestants.

In this paper, we provide a multi-method exploration of the extent, purpose, and meaning of religiosity and spirituality in covenant and standard marriages contracted in Louisiana in the years shortly after the passage of covenant marriage. We use quantitative data from a three-wave panel study of newlywed couples and qualitative face-to-face interviews with a subset of individuals and couples from the panel study to explore the multidimensionality of religious experiences in the early years of marriage. We compare and contrast covenant and standard married couples across multiple religious and spiritual domains. We especially focus on how their jointly-shared visions of religiosity inform beliefs about the sanctification of marriage. Covenant couples are more religious and share many of the gender and marital ideologies of conservative evangelical Protestants, but we also show the symbolic and practical meaning of a covenant as opposed to a standard marriage for their personal and political purposes. We specifically explore why these religious couples felt the necessity to contract a covenant as opposed to standard marriage.

One reason is that covenant marriage serves as an interpersonally, culturally, and politically potent signal to others of the couple's beliefs about the sacred purpose of marriage as a foundational institution. Covenant marriage announces a couple's obligation to protect marriage for their family and society. Covenant marriage provides a tool to merge personal and political beliefs in a

meaningfully integrated way. The covenant signal serves these private and public purposes for covenant married couples in ways not routinely shared by even the most religious of the standard married couples.

Multi-method, multi-dimension analyses of religiosity in marriage

In the 1980s, researchers called for more multidimensional research with an emphasis on how religion and families reinforce each other through social support and social control (Thomas and Cornwall 1990). Thomas and Henry (1985) identified a need for more research on the social-psychological consequences of multidimensional facets of religiosity. More recently, researchers have clarified differences between intrinsic and extrinsic religious identification and motivation, proximal and distal measures of religiosity, positive and negative religious coping, and religious affiliation, ideology and practice (Gartner, Larson and Allen 1991; Hughes and Dickson 2005; Mahoney et al 1999; Weaver et al 2002). Research is expanding on the beneficial and detrimental dimensions of religiosity and religious involvement on physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, and community dynamics. We argue that understanding individual beliefs, religious practices, and interpersonal and communal religious participation is basic to understand the sociality of religion and its effects on individuals and couples. As Scheepers and Van Der Slik (1998) note: “if one ignores that respondents interact with others, one overestimates the effects of individual characteristics and underestimates the effects of primary and secondary social networks.” Our multi-method, multidimensional design identifies the selection effects of greater religiosity, fundamentalism and evangelicism among covenant couples as compared to standard couples. It also shows covenant couples’ beliefs about how the spiritual realm works within marriage to benefit themselves personally, but also the larger society.

Covenant marriage as a family law reform and cultural signal

Marriage and divorce rates have changed considerably in the United States over the past several decades (Bumpass 1990; Bennett, Bloom and Craig 1993; Teachman, Tedrow and Crowder 2000). Estimates indicate that 40 to 50% of all marriages will end in divorce and some suggest that a marriage is more likely to end in divorce than in death or widowhood (Raley and Bumpass 2003; Watkins, Menken and Bongaarts 1987). The proportion of Black women that never marry is also increasing, and some recent evidence indicates a small decline in ever-marriage by age 40 among White women as well (Teachman, Tedrow and Crowder 2000; Casper and Bianchi 2002). These fundamental changes in marriage formation and dissolution encouraged policymakers to develop public programs and legal reforms intended to strengthen marriage and discourage divorce (Bogenschneider 2000; Galston 1996; Popenoe 1999). The Bush administration has launched a national *Healthy Marriage Initiative*. Congress has declared that non-marital births, reliance on welfare assistance, and single-mother families are contrary to national interests. Every state has now undertaken efforts to promote or strengthen marriage (Besharov and Sullivan 1996; Ooms et al 2004). Covenant marriage predates all such efforts, yet like them grew out of a large national marriage movement, consisting of religious, political and family counseling organizations (Covenant Marriage Movement webpage, 2001). Louisiana became the first state to pass this legislation in 1997, and Arizona and Arkansas followed suit soon after. In 1998 alone, more than 17 states considered similar covenant marriage bills (Nichols 1998). In total 20-30 states either considered or are considering covenant marriage bills (Divorce Reform 2001).

Covenant marriage laws are remarkable for two reasons. First, they are historically unprecedented for offering their citizens a choice between two forms of legal marriage: standard or covenant. Second, covenant marriage embodies most of the policy features that recently have been considered as ways to promote a more permanent form of marriage and discourage divorce. These include stricter entrance and exit requirements. Couples opting for a covenant marriage must agree to

premarital counseling from a member of the clergy or a marriage counselor, must sign and file a legally-binding affidavit (usually referred to as a declaration of intent) attesting to their belief that marriage is a lifelong commitment and to their disclosure of everything in their past that might have an effect on their marriage, agreeing to take all reasonable steps (including marital counseling) to preserve their marriage should problems arise, and agreeing to stricter fault-based divorce or lengthier separation prior to a divorce. Acceptable fault-based reasons include adultery, commission of a felony resulting in life-imprisonment or the death penalty, physical or sexual abuse of a spouse or of a child of one of the spouses, or abandonment. Covenant couples who do not pursue fault-based divorces must live separately for 18 months prior to a decree. Standard marriages, in contrast, may be dissolved on “no-fault” grounds such as “irreconcilable differences” after six-month separations (Waite and Gallagher 2000).

Proponents of covenant marriage believe that the stricter entrance and exit requirements of covenant marriage promote a greater commitment to marriage, prevent hastily made decisions to marry (and divorce), and generally foster “better” marriages (see Nock, Wright and Sanchez 1999 for a review). By mutually agreeing to a legally binding contract that stipulates premarital counseling and subsequent counseling should problems arise during the marriage, couples entering covenant marriages start their marriages, in theory, with a greater degree of commitment and understanding than do standard couples who start their marriages without premarital counseling and often with little or no thought about how they will deal with problems that may arise during marriage. At the very least, proponents suggest that simply having the option of covenant marriage opens lines of communication that may have otherwise remained closed.

Critically, advocates of covenant marriage also believe it is a possible solution to the “decline” of the American family and can serve as a cultural signal to reinvigorate marriage. For example, the major sponsor of the Louisiana covenant marriage bill, then Freshman Representative

and current president of the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins, and the law professor who drafted the bill, Katherine Spaht, believe that covenant marriage appeals to a variety of individuals likely to be distrustful of marriage, such as divorced individuals or individuals whose own parents divorced (Rosier and Feld 2000).

More important, Spaht (1998) envisions covenant marriage as a cultural watershed or signal. First, she sees covenant marriage as an opportunity to make private marriage a public and sacred responsibility, by encouraging couples to bring witnesses (typically *religious* leaders) into their unions. Second, Spaht argues that covenant marriage may foster a cultural turning point, and that covenant couples may actively signal this change. She says (1998, 72), “by their example and public discussion of the optional covenant marriage, the cultural perception of marriage could gradually shift to the point of acceptance of a new, yet at the same time very old, paradigm – lifelong marriage.” Indeed, Spaht (1998) sees covenant marriage as a critical means to change marriage trends and renew the symbolic, cultural meaning of marriage.

Recent studies suggest that newly-marrying covenant couples and currently married covenant “upgraders” agree with Spaht’s view and feel that the covenant distinction is not just symbolically important to themselves in their own unions, but stands as a political and moral statement to their communities and to a political and social culture they see as poisonous to enduring marriage (Loconte 1998; Rosier and Feld 2000; Sanchez, Nock Wright and Gager 2002).

Opponents see covenant marriage as possibly coercive and potentially dangerous (see Nock, Wright and Sanchez 1999 for a review), positing that the option and the mandatory counseling provisions may lead to undue religious and psychological pressure. Some fear that religious officials and institutions in Louisiana may refuse to marry couples unless they opt for covenant marriages (we are aware of one such church). Others fear that it is an attempt by the religious right to promote the subservience of wives to their husbands, potentially “trapping” women and children in unhappy or

abusive situations. Finally, some argue that covenant marriage breaches the separation of church and state.

What remains to emerge from these debates is how covenant and standard couples understand their *own* marriages in this wider public dialogue. This is the purpose of the research reported here. This study explores how newlywed couples perceive the fusion of their religion, marriage, and public responsibility. Our data comprise the only longitudinal panel study of newlywed covenant and standard couples and include multiple dimensions of religiosity, spirituality, gender, family and social policy attitudes, and marital functioning. We also triangulate this diverse quantitative information with rich qualitative interviews.

Religiosity and the binding of marriage

The research literature is clear that religiosity often has positive effects on individual well-being, life satisfaction, coping skills, and psychological and physical health (Chamberlain and Zika 1988; Bickel et al 1998; Exline, Yali and Sanderson 2000; Genia 1996; Pargament et al 2001, 1998a, 1998b, 1988; Payne et al 1992; Seybold and Hill 2001; Tix and Frazier 1998; Willits and Crider 1988). Religion and spirituality also have positive effects on marital dyads as well (Waite and Lehrer 2003). More proximal forms of religiosity, such as intrinsic spirituality and perceived importance of religiosity, rather than specific denominational affiliation, are associated with increased positive communication strategies, increased marital interaction quality and support, and decreased hostility (Brody et al 1994; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Mahoney et al 1999; Snow and Compton 1996; Wilcox 2003; Wilcox and Bartkowski 2000). Religious attendance and religiosity also are associated with increased marital dependency and stability, greater likelihood of marital reconciliation, and decreased chances of divorce (Call and Heaton 1997; Heaton and Pratt 1990; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Wilson and Musick 1996; Wineberg 1994).

These positive effects are strongest for religiously homogamous couples who share regular religious attendance, practices, and a mutually-supportive religiosity (Dudley and Kosinski 1990; Heaton 1984). Using the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Wilson and Musick (1996) find that church attendance, couple religious homogamy, and fundamentalism increase marital dependency, with the effects of marital homogamy strongest among fundamentalists. Some research suggests that regular church attendance is associated with a lower likelihood of domestic violence (Ellison, Bartkowski and Anderson 1999). Despite some evidence of negative forms of religiosity in marriage (Exline et al 1999; Pargament et al 2001), on the whole, research documents that couples who deeply integrate religion and marriage have greater marital stability and personal wellbeing.

But this literature provides little insight into religiosity's relationship to external goals couples may have for their marriage (see Gallagher (2003) and Bartkowski (2001) for exceptions). Couples may perceive marriage to be a social institution that demands more than love, intimacy, and respect. We know little about how couples who are intensely mutually religious perceive the purpose of religion in their marriage for the public purpose of providing a model to others of a sacred relationship between society and God. Couples who perceive the wider society as deficient in family or spiritual values may understand their own unions as serving a public religious service with potentially transformative power.

We explore this issue by directly addressing individuals' and couple's perceptions of how, and whether, their religious marriage serves important public or communal goals. We also examine the consequences of this view of their marriage.

Covenant marriage as a signal

Our theoretical perspective draws on economic signaling theory and religious studies about the pursuit of the sacred. In general terms, economic signaling theory argues that marriage serves as a signal to others against the potential personal or financial risk imposed by a faith-breaching partner

(Rowthorn 2002). From this perspective, marriage, and a willingness to marry, signals commitment and exclusivity, acceptance of normative guidelines for good interpersonal behavior, and credibility as a dependable mature citizen to the partner, employers, and the government. The marriage signal contains both interpersonal and community properties.

A critical issue is that “the effectiveness of marriage as a signal frequently depends on having a significant cost attached” (Rowthorn 2002, 137). Rowthorn states the principle as “honest signals are costly” (2002, 136). Serious individuals who signal a desire for marriage demonstrate their trustworthiness by seeking personally costly ways to convey honorable, faithful intentions, such as foregoing other intimate partners, entering premarital counseling, or adopting joint religious or social practices with the intended partner. The problem, however, is that “[i]t has become more difficult for men and women to signal their commitment by getting married, since marriage commits the partners to less than used to be the case” (Rowthorn 2002, 140).

For those who want their marriage to truly signal sexual exclusiveness, lifetime commitment, and mutual support, this problem of marriage as a weak signal is pervasive and profound. Every divorce or infidelity in the wider society reduces the credibility of marriage. Rowthorn (2002, 142) notes that “marriage is like a professional qualification, whose value as a signal depends crucially on its reputation. ...Committed couples and society at large have a common interest in discouraging modifications to the marriage contract or forms of behavior that undermine the reputation of marriage.”

Thus, covenant marriage may serve as a good signal in a weak marriage climate. Superficially, covenant marriage substantially raises entrance and exit costs, by requiring premarital counseling, full disclosures of relationship and sexual histories, marital counseling, and exclusive grounds for divorce. The main goal is to signal accurate and clear commitment to marriage as an institution by distinguishing it from the standard “impermanent” form of marriage. A further goal is

to provide private and public mechanisms to foster this commitment, even during times when difficulties burden the relationship.

Why would religious individuals value covenant marriage as a new signal of their traditional intention? Pargament (2002) defines religion as a “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” and assumes this search is conducted by proactive, goal-directed individuals. Hill et al (2000) define the sacred as “a person, object or a principle, or a concept that transcends the self,” requiring reverence, devotion and extreme care. Hill et al further argue that “this inclination to ‘sanctify’ or spiritualize what are otherwise secular objects, roles or responsibilities” can have profound measurable effects on choices, actions, and well-being.

Accordingly, the perception that marriage is a sanctified relationship, configuring the couple in a close, duty-bound holy relationship with God, should orient and oblige the spouses to greater commitment, mutual support, and devout adherence to respectful communication and joint ritualistic and social participation in a church community. It most certainly will unite them in a shared belief in marriage’s permanence. For someone with a strong personal need and perceived obligation to sanctify marriage, receiving a clear signal about a potential partner’s marital commitment is paramount. A blow to the sacred marital relationship, such as an unwanted divorce, may exact extreme debilitating psychic costs, complicated by a guilt-inducing sense of betrayal by God or a shame-flooding sense of personal failure to serve God (Pargament et al 1998).

In this marriage market context of heightened anxiety about the credibility of the signal of marriage, establishing a “true” signal, that is, sending and receiving a signal that conveys respect and subservience to the sanctity of marriage, becomes critical (Pargament 2002). But more importantly, the design of a proper marriage signal becomes both a private drive *and a public service*. In the latter case, a very religious individual may feel that a strong marriage signal benefits the wider

community's families and children by inspiring confidence about marriage as an institution (Sanchez, Nock, Wright and Gager 2002).

Thus, covenant marriage may incorporate both an intrinsic and extrinsic signal about an individual's personal (private) fitness to enter marriage and also devoutly protect marriage as a public institution. Many in the marriage market may feel little need to send this signal of trustworthiness, holiness, and readiness. A standard marriage may suffice. However, covenant marriage may be uniquely appealing to those who want to signal both private and public messages about the sacred nature of marriage and family responsibilities. If so, covenant marriage is an effective way to filter couples who share a sanctified vision of marriage, distinguishing their unions from "standard" marriages. Moreover, by their marriages, covenant couples, at a grassroots political level, signal the wider community about their commitment to the preservation of marriage as a bedrock institution.

Guiding questions

We know from earlier studies that those who select covenant marriages tend to be more mutually religious and fundamentalist, more likely to undergo and perceive benefits from religious premarital counseling, less likely to have cohabited or had children prior to marriage, and less likely to divorce (Sanchez, Nock, Deines, and Wright 2003a; Sanchez, Nock, Wilson and Wright 2003b). Building on this knowledge, we explore whether or not there appears to be some social-psychological phenomenon above and beyond these general aggregate differences that is wholly unique about how religion and spirituality characterize covenant marriage. Thus, three guiding questions shape this exploratory study.

1. First, what are the substantive aspects of religion and spirituality that distinguish covenant marriages from standard marriages?
2. Second, are covenant couples more likely to perceive their marriage as a unique sanctified relationship that entails great responsibilities toward God?

3. Third, are covenant couples more likely than standard couples to believe that marriage serves a “signaling” function? That is, we focus on whether covenant couples are more likely to believe that their private marriage serves a sanctified public purpose.

Data

Quantitative data. The data are from a three wave, 5-year panel study of newlywed couples who married in Louisiana in 1999-2000 (Marriage Matters, University of Virginia, 2001). On average, the first wave was administered 3 to 6 months after the wedding, the second wave 18 months later, and the third wave 4 ½ to 6 years after the wedding. The sample selection criteria consisted of two steps. First, 17 out of 60 parishes were selected randomly and proportionate to size. Second, from these 17 parishes, all covenant marriage licenses and the matched standard marriage licenses filed next to the covenant licenses were drawn. Of the 1,714 licenses that were validly part of our sampling frame, we eventually confirmed 1,310 couples for a confirmation rate of 76.4%. Our response rate for the first wave mail survey was 60%. The second and third wave response rates were 92% and 78% respectively, excluding the couples who divorced or separated between waves. For this study, we use a sub-sample in which both spouses completed surveys, and we use religiosity indicators from the first and third waves, for an effective sample size of 557.

Forty-four percent and 56% of our sample are covenant and standard married, respectively. In terms of demographic characteristics, the mean ages of covenant husbands and wives at the beginning of the study were 30 and 28, while standard married husbands and wives were 33 and 30. Among the covenant-married couples, 79.8% reported both spouses as White, 9.7% as both Black, and 10.5% as other racial or ethnic combinations. Among the standard-married couples, 74.0% reported both spouses as White, 13.8% as both Black, and 12.2% as other racial or ethnic combinations. Covenant-married husbands, wives and couples have higher educational attainment than do standard-married couples; in one of every four covenant-married couples, both spouses have

a college degree, as compared to about one in every five standard-married couples. The covenant- and standard-married couples in our study have similar levels of income and full-time employment. Standard-married couples are much more likely than covenant-married couples to have cohabited prior to the marriage and to have children from previous relationships or their own union before the marriage. By the end of the study, covenant-married couples had a divorce rate approximately 40% that of the standard-married couples.

Quantitative Measures

Couple's denominational affiliation and fundamentalism. We use both partners' reports to prepare the denominational affiliation of the couple, using Steensland et al's (2000) classification scheme. This scheme categorizes denominational information to distinguish Protestant religions according to their evangelical and modernist mainline orientations. Based on these divisions, we develop three categories, representing couples in which: both spouses are evangelical Protestant; both spouses share an affiliation as either mainline Protestant, Catholic or other denominational faith; and the spouses' denominational affiliations differ or at least one does not belong to a religious community (e.g., atheist or agnostic). We also measure whether couples share a fundamentalist interpretation of their religion, through a dummy variable measuring both spouses' reports of agreement or strong agreement with the statement "I regard myself as a religious fundamentalist."

Religious participation. We measure shared religious participation with self-reports of prayer, church attendance and religious holiday celebration. Dummy variables measure whether both partners report that they each pray several times a day, attend church at least once per week, always attend together, and believe that the celebration of religion is core to holidays.

Religiosity/spirituality. We measure shared religiosity and spirituality with variables that asked how important personal religious faith in life is (coded extremely important or not) and

whether it was extremely important that both partners felt the same way about religion in making plans to get married.

Shared religious attitudes about their own marriage. We measure the partners' attitudes about the nature of religion and God in their marriage through five dummy variables constructed from the following Likert-scale statements: "God is at the center of our marriage," "I turn to God for help in handling decisions in our marriage," "if you and your partner were ever to get a divorce, God would be disappointed in you," "we are trying to set a good example for others with our marriage," and "some people think it is strange that we have more respect for marriage than they do." The dummy variables indicate whether both partners strongly agree that God is at the center of their marriage, both strongly agree that God would be disappointed if they divorced, and strongly agree that they are trying to set a good example for others with their marriage, both turn to God for help with their marriage at least once a day, and both agree or strongly agree that people perceive them as strange because they have greater respect for marriage than others.

Shared religious attitudes about marriage as an institution. We measure the partners' attitudes about the perceived relationship between God, the Devil, and religion, on the one hand, and marriage and divorce in society, on the other hand, through their mutual strong agreement with seven Likert-scale statements: "Marriage is a blessing from God," "marriage is an unbreakable covenant with God, not just a contract recognized by the law," "marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances," "people often feel pain during divorce because they lost God's blessing (agree or strongly agree)," "divorce destroys God's divine gift of marriage," "the Devil is trying to ruin the American family," and "divorce is the Devil's way of destroying God's sacred blessing of marriage."

Qualitative data. We also are in the unique position to draw upon qualitative data collected from face-to-face interviews conducted in Louisiana in June 2003 with 42 respondents from the panel

study. Twenty-four of the 42 individuals interviewed either were or had been part of covenant marriages (14 women and 10 men); 18 were or had been part of standard marriages (11 women and 7 men). The ages of the respondents ranged from the mid-20s to early 70s, with most in their late 20s to early 50s. Most respondents were White, though several were Black and a few Hispanic. Respondents from interracial or interethnic relationships were represented. A variety of occupations and educational levels were represented, creating a range of socioeconomic statuses. For example, occupations include police officers, nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers, engineers, self-employed skilled trades people, unemployed women and men, an auto mechanic, clerks, and various service workers, such as a social worker, groundskeeper for rental properties, waitress, church music director, and window washer. The religious affiliations and denominations reflected great diversity, especially among the standard couples, including Evangelical and Mainline Protestant affiliations, and Catholics. The sample also included respondents of rarer religious affiliations, such as a Wiccan, and several people who were of lapsed faith, who seriously questioned their faith, or had changed their denomination affiliation as part of their marriage.

Respondents were asked open-ended questions falling into several categories. One category of inquiry centered on religion and spirituality, specifically the ways in which religious and spiritual beliefs influenced and shaped the respondents' marriages, if at all. Respondents who said that they were religious or spiritual also were asked whether they felt that their marriage, or part of their marriage, was sacred or holy in some way, and whether or not they felt God was a presence or partner in their marriage. For those who sanctified their marriage in this manner, we interviewed them about the implications of these perceptions for their feelings about the private and public purposes of their marriage.

Results

Denominational affiliation, religious participation, and religiosity.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of covenant- and standard-married couples' joint denominational and fundamentalist status, religious participation, and religiosity. As expected, covenant couples are markedly more religious and homogamously so than are standard couples. In the majority of cases, covenant couples share an evangelical Protestant denomination (78.2%). Compared to standard couples, covenant couples are more than twice as likely to be evangelical Protestants, and three times as likely to report being fundamentalist. Standard married couples are three times more likely to have spouses who either are not attached to a denomination or do not share the same denominational affiliation. Only 12.5% of covenant couples have spouses who do not share the same denominational affiliation, as compared to 35.7% of standard couples.

Covenant couples also mutually participate much more actively in religious activities. Three times as many wives and husbands in covenant than standard couples mutually report praying several times a day, and more than twice as many covenant couples mutually report that they attend church at least once every week, always attend together, and celebrate religion as the core of holidays. In only one-third of standard couples do both partners report always attending church together, compared to 57.7% of covenant couples. Only approximately 1 in 10 standard couples have spouses who both report praying every day and attending church each week, as compared with 36.8% and 51.4% of covenant couples.

The contrast is even greater for perceived religiosity and spirituality. The majority of covenant couples have spouses who both report the extreme importance of a personal religious faith in life and the necessity of spouses' shared faith, 61.3% and 54.5% respectively. In only approximately 1 in 5 standard couples does religiosity reach this level of extreme salience.

Religious attitudes about the sanctification of marriage, demonization of divorce

Table 2 presents wave 3 descriptive statistics of respondents' beliefs about the sanctification of marriage and demonization of divorce. Five to seven years since marriage, covenant couples are

more likely to see a holy purpose to their marriage, see marriage as a divine gift, and perceive the Devil as actively trying to harm families and society through the vehicle of divorce.

Almost 4 times as many covenants as standards have spouses who both strongly agree that God is at the center of their marriage. Covenants are three times more likely to have spouses who strongly agree that they are trying to set a good example for others with their marriage and God would be disappointed if they divorced. Covenants are twice as likely to agree that they turn to God for help with their marriage every day and that people perceive them as strange for their greater respect for marriage.

At the most, only 20% of standards strongly, jointly agree that others perceive them as strange for their greater respect for marriage. Across the other items, only 1 in 10 standards report a sense of obligation to the community or God to uphold a God-centered marriage. In contrast, upwards of 45% of covenant spouses jointly strongly agree about the necessity of a God-centered, purposeful marriage. Similar patterns occur for the other attitude items. Covenant couples are more than twice as likely to jointly strongly agree that marriage is a blessing from God, and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances, and more than three times more likely to conceive of marriage as a covenant with God rather than contract. Sixty-two percent and 54% of covenant couples jointly strongly agree that marriage is an unbreakable lifetime relationship and also a in covenant with God (respectively), as compared to only 15% to 35% of standards.

Covenants extend this God-centered view of marriage to attitudes about the societal consequences of divorce. Covenant spouses are twice as likely to mutually agree that divorce is painful because people lose God's blessing and that divorce destroys God's divine gift. Critically, a high percentage of covenants perceive an active presence of demonic forces undermining American families and marriages. Only 1 in 10 standard couples agree that the Devil is trying to ruin the

American family and divorce is the Devil's way of destroying God's sacred blessing of marriage, as compared to one-third to 40% of covenant spouses.

These survey items demonstrate core differences between covenant and standard newlyweds in salience and intensity of religiosity and religious attitudes, and a far greater degree of accord between covenant rather than standard spouses about the centrality of religion. The quantitative data indicate clearly that covenants are far more likely to perceive the workings of divine and demonic forces in their marriages. We amplify these findings with an analysis of our qualitative data to more completely examine their contrasting expressions of religious ideologies about marriage.

'The family that prays together stays together' vs. 'I can't say that I am a spiritual person'

The qualitative interviews illustrate strong differences between covenant and standard couples. Covenant couples assiduously organize their lives and marriages around God and religion; standard couples may be (unevenly) spiritual, but usually are not devout. From this general point, the face-to-face interviews confirm three major contrasting findings. The first concerns the role of religion in their daily routine as wives and husbands. Standard married couples represent a diverse range of religious, non-religious, and spiritual experience, with great within-couple heterogeneity. In contrast, covenant married couples believe strongly that shared spirituality and religious practice are core to respect, support and communication. The second major finding concerns the spouses' perceived immediacy of God in their relationship. Standard married couples do not uniformly believe that God is a partner or presence in their marriage. In fact, they were usually silent about this possibility, unless directly asked during the interview. Many seemed confused by the question about God's partnership or presence in marriage. In stark contrast, covenant married couples talked extensively about God's active presence, partnership and direction in bringing the spouses together and keeping their marriage holy and stable.

The third, most critical finding addresses the signaling purposes of marriage. Covenant couples have multi-faceted messages they believe are conveyed by their marriage. They discuss in rich terms how this symbolic new form of marriage serves as an excellent tool for sending specific messages to their partner and wider community about their mature and serious commitment to marriage. Not surprisingly, standard married couples are largely silent about sending special personal or political messages with their marriage vow, and they frequently have dismissive opinions about the public necessity of covenant marriage.

Standards' individual diversity vs. covenants' mutuality in religious experience

Standard couples and spiritual diversity. The standard couples are remarkably diverse in religious faiths and spirituality. From our small qualitative sample, recruited by convenience from our panel study, we find a wealth of religious and spiritual orientations. A standard wife, who divorced and remarried during the study, noted that she was raised Catholic but as an adult only experiences spirituality through Alcoholics Anonymous. Another standard divorced wife said that she was not religious, but sends her children to Catholic schools because Louisiana's public schools are bad, and that she attended religiously-based marital counseling about her abusive marriage only because it was free. One very young standard divorced husband said that he was not religious, but he knew that God wanted him to be happy and had protected him during his painful, bitter divorce. One couple had an animist/Baptist wife married to a "cradle Catholic" husband whose family had attended the same church for generations. One couple converted from Presbyterianism to an evangelical Baptist faith, in part because they valued the church's marriage-enrichment programming. One Wiccan wife married to an agnostic but Buddhist-dabbling husband said, "I am very big into angels and meditation and the Tarot cards." One inter-racial couple reported that they were both raised Catholic but are no longer religious because they do not agree with all the tenets. The wife said, "We are not the church-going Catholics." However, they had a High Mass Catholic Church wedding

because the wife's grandmother wanted to see her last granddaughter married in the faith. A few, such as one 32-year-old wife and mother, denied that religion or spirituality played any part in their life: "I don't believe in a Jesus or a God. I believe in people controlling their own destiny and making the right choices for themselves."

Standard couples often include partners of different religious traditions, such as a Catholic wife married to a lapsed Methodist husband. Within these mixed couples, we often find further diversity in each spouse's interpretation of their religion. This latter Catholic wife is actively reinterpreting her Catholicism and now attends a Methodist church, without much enthusiasm by her husband. She says, "I still believe in the teachings of the Catholic church. I'm still Catholic, but I think I'm also able to consider things from other spiritual beliefs as well. I find peace in the fact that everybody is so different in their faith even within one church. I think my spirituality has grown in a more freeing way than in the confines of a Catholic school." The animist/Baptist, Catholic Church-attending wife mentioned earlier is another excellent example of this complexity. She says, "My mother taught us that God exists in everything and every one. So, you have a respect for others that comes from that kind of teaching, and I think I bring that spirituality on a daily basis more to my marriage and my children than say Catholicism." She reports that she is not fundamentalist, but is evangelical, and that she finds the community and ritual of church participation important to her feeling of connectedness to an ancestral continuum.

Several standard couples engage minimally while not fully identifying as religious people because they perceive religion as necessary for their children, if not themselves. A young standard couple with an infant and toddler best illustrates this orientation. Both were raised Catholic, lapsed in early adulthood, but now are returning to church. The husband says,

"We are trying to become a little more spiritual. I was raised a Catholic, but my parents were not churchgoers. Since we've been married, we tried to nurture more of the spirituality, joined the church, attended church functions, go to mass, things of that nature. I can't say that I would see myself as a spiritual person. I certainly believe in God, certainly have strong

beliefs about Christianity, but I wouldn't say that I have done enough to be considered spiritual. But I'm hoping that we can nurture that in the two boys."

And many standard married individuals who professed some degree of religiosity or spirituality conceded that the extent of their participation in organized religious activities rarely exceeded weekly service attendance. Some noted that they did not attend church as much as they "should," while others explained that they were not the "church-going type."

Covenant couples and shared spirituality. The covenant couples' interviews, in contrast, are rich with stories reflecting their core belief that shared spirituality and religious practice builds respect, warm understanding, and positive marital relations. All of the covenant married respondents described themselves as religious and/or spiritual (many did not distinguish between the two) and all spoke of their active participation in a variety of religious activities, both within and outside the church. Several spoke of their belief that "the family that prays together stays together." One covenant husband in a blended marriage with children from both their marriages and a new infant together said, "It takes time on your knees to ask for help. We rely on Him." His wife shared that "We pray together every night. It doesn't have to be this long in depth prayer time, but just take the time to thank the Lord for each other and to pray for each other every night." Another husband confided, "She will ask me sometimes to just lay hands on her and just pray over her mind and pray over her body. She counts on me to go before her to God." When asked what he would say to a couple thinking about marriage, another covenant husband in his late 20s replied, "make sure you pray, that you actually pray with your spouse, and don't just pray when things are going bad."

In fact, covenant husbands were much more likely than standard husbands to underscore the perceived need for shared religiosity. For example, one young seminarian husband, whose wife of 4 years is currently pregnant, talked about the necessity of shared spirituality and religion as the basis for marriage. He said,

“People try to base marriages on a commonality. What type of foundation is it? That is a shaky foundation. You know, ‘we like the same music’ or a common bond that you like to golf. To me that’s superficial. But when you get down to the spiritual matter, that is something that does not change, it is rock solid. When we come together, we can pray together. And that builds intimacy between us, it builds unity in our family. It lets her know and me know that we care about each other so much, that we’re going to go to the Lord together.”

An older remarried husband noted, “I think whatever religion a family is based on, it’s got to be a religion where both the husband and wife worship together. I truly believe that kids are watching and they’re not watching what mommy and daddy say, but what mommy and daddy do.” And last, a young covenant couple in which the husband is a window washer and the wife a homemaker best exemplifies this covenant sentiment. Like several of our covenant couples, they belong to a cell church which consists of about half a dozen families who meet in each other’s homes. Oftentimes, cell church congregants combine a few days each week of informal meetings in each other’s homes with formal attendance at an evangelical Protestant church in the community. However, in this case, this young couple believes that their cell church is less tainted by society’s corrupting influences and they abstain from formal church membership. They were virgins at marriage and have had three children and are currently pregnant with a fourth, during the first four years of their marriage. The husband says,

“I do not want to get mystical, but I can feel Him in everything that we do. He is in the center and we are in that circle. We are always around that. It is the central focus of whatever we do. Our kids know that. I mean, Alice is three. She knows the importance of that. So we just try to pass that on as best we can, and try to make this world a better place.”

Thus, covenant couples wholly integrate jointly-shared religious practice into their private marriages in ways not shared by standard couples.

Standards’ stand-alone marriages vs. covenants’ sanctified partnerships with God

Standard couples’ wariness about claiming a marital partnership with God. A significant difference between standard and covenant couples is the perceived relationship of God to their marriage. Standard couples were very unlikely to perceive a guiding presence in their marriage or to

feel that they were in a partnership with God. Some standard individuals mentioned feeling sacred moments or places in their marriage, with wives most likely to mention sexual intimacy and especially motherhood as sacred domains. But absent from their dialogue was the perception that marriage is a sanctified relationship which requires great responsibility in conduct, mindfulness, and gratitude toward God. A standard wife and mother who is an engineer is an extreme example. Asked what she thought it takes to make marriage work, she replied, “Obviously what it takes to make a marriage work is whatever a couple thinks it takes to make a marriage work. If they think it’s God that makes a marriage, then you are going to make it with God.”

One standard wife and new mother of two who nursed her mentally ill husband back to health said, “God is not a partner in our marriage. [But] I see [our marriage] as a sacred relationship most definitely. I would say that the sacredness comes from a unity that comes from forsaking all others. Marriage in a sense is like a ritual in which you create a separate space for yourself in the world, for you and your family, and it’s a very sacred kind of space that you do things for each other in that space that you don’t do for anyone else in the world.” This woman does not define this sacredness in terms of a guiding, holy presence or relationship with God. Her spirituality involves a very active sense of the couple’s dyadic relationship and separateness from others. Even a standard couple who was most similar to the covenant couples in terms of active participation in an evangelical Baptist church and intense focus on mutual sharing of religiosity was reluctant to claim God as a partner in their marriage. The husband said, “Anybody who would say just, ‘yes, absolutely,’ is crazy. I mean it’s just not as easy as that.”

Covenant couples’ rejoicing about sharing a marital partnership with God. In contrast, covenant couples were eloquent in explaining how God is a partner in marriage, and that marriage will not work without Him. The interviews are dense with these well-elaborated, embroidered points. For instance, several husbands discussed God’s foundational presence in their marriage. One said,

“The closer you grow to God, the closer you grow together.” One young Black husband noted that “God is everything. Instead of just a partner, He is everything. He’s the foundation.” Another young Black husband reported, “I see God as a partner in my marriage. He has the ultimate authority of what goes down in this house.” Two working-class covenant husbands in their 40s said, “Having God and serving God is number one. We’re both striving to please God and not ourselves” and “I believe marriage is a union ordained by God. That is, it’s a promise, it’s a vow you’ve made to each other as well as to God.”

Unlike standard couples, covenant wives and husbands were very mutual in how they described this partnership. Two examples illustrate. The first is from interviews with a blended covenant family in which both the wife and husband were previously divorced:

Wife: “God is the glue that holds this marriage together and this family together. He is the center of our marriage.”

Husband: “I feel like God put us together. I have had areas in my life where I am weak, and she is very strong. There are areas in her life where she has been weak, and I am strong. There are times that we are both weak. Without God, trying to blend this family – it would have blown up.”

The second is from an interview with the young couple in which the husband is a seminary student and the wife is pregnant with their first child:

Wife: “Definitely we see our marriage as God ordained. God is the God of our relationship; he is our source of purpose, motivation, and commitment, and our source of love, being love in action.”

Husband: “Marriage is not two people looking at each other; it is two people looking in the same direction towards God. He is the bond. It is by the grace of God that we have such a good relationship. But anything could happen to damage a relationship, but it is God who will sustain the relationship. Where we fail, He is strong.”

The covenant couples saw conveying their mutual agreement about God’s guiding presence in their marriage as a central goal of their interviews.

In harmony with this belief, covenant couples earnestly think that marriage cannot survive without this partnership. As one husband said, “If you do not have God first all in your life, then you are not going to have a good marriage and you are going to have problems.” A middle-aged covenant

wife noted that, “I feel definitely that they have to have the Lord first in their marriage and they have to make sure each of them is grounded firmly in the Lord. I mean, it’s awful difficult when you have one that’s grounded and the other swaying a little bit. Make sure both of their foundations are very firm in the Lord – that would be number one.”

The young covenant couple with three children and a pregnancy who belong to a cell church held an overlapping discussion about the necessity of God’s presence and their obligation to serve Him as the basis for their marriage’s stability. When asked if God had been an important guiding presence, the husband said, “Absolutely,” and the wife quickly added, “Definitely. I don’t think there’s any way to have a real marriage without God because people are selfish by nature.” Her husband expanded this theme, noting that “Once you learn how to guide yourself, when you serve Christ, then I think it is a little easier to do that with a marriage. In serving God, that has helped dramatically. If I have problems, I don’t go to my drinking buddies. They went through a divorce, what are you going to ask them for advice? We go to the One who put us together.” This argument about God’s binding strength in marriage perhaps was best made by a young suburban covenant housewife with a toddler and infant who met her husband as a girl, was ‘Born Again’ under his guidance as a teenager, and maintained her virginity until she married after college. She says,

“It’s not in our nature for it to be easy to get with somebody else. And to say, ‘Oh, well I have faults and you have faults, but we are going to make this work as a team.’ I think that is why we need God. I think God created marriage, so that we would need him because I don’t think we can do it alone. I know we can’t in our marriage. There’s no possible way that we’ve gotten this far just because we said, ‘Hey, let’s make this work!’ We’ve had to really depend on the Lord a lot. It’s not natural for you to sit here and say, ‘I want to serve you,’ because you are looking out for yourself.”

A young covenant husband affirmed, “God did not put us together for us to separate. I just cannot stress that enough. God is going to do everything in His power [to make marriage work].”

One singular example of a covenant couple’s belief about God’s power to uphold and heal occurred in a marriage in which the husband was an addict and had solicited sex from a prostitute.

His serious drug and sexual addictions were brought publicly to light when he was arrested in the line of duty as a peace officer. He was certain his wife would leave him outright, but his wife had forced him to choose a covenant rather than standard marriage when they first married. She sent her father and pastor to the jail to talk with him about his spirituality. She stayed married to him, but required that he undertake Christian-based addiction rehabilitation and Christian marital counseling, and demanded that he rejoin a church and attend both services and instructional classes. Of these non-negotiable requirements, she said, “He’s supposed to be the spiritual leader of the house. He’s got to make a commitment to God because God’s got to be first in his life. If he can’t be committed to God first then he can’t be committed to me.” In her very testimonial, confessional interview, she vividly described driving to an attorney’s office to file for divorce, and having a fight with God. She said, “God turned my car around. I wanted to go. I [told God] ‘I’m not doing it. I don’t care about him, I don’t love him. I hate him right now and I don’t want anything to do with him.’ And just the Spirit inside of you says, ‘Shut up.’ It’s not about you. In your life, you gotta realize that in marriage, it’s not about you. It’s about your relationship. It’s about God.”

About God’s intervention, the recovering husband said, “I know God’s here because if He wasn’t in our marriage, we wouldn’t be married today. [I committed infidelity], so my wife could’ve gotten a divorce, but God kind of glued us back together. So I know that He’s in our marriage.” This story is extreme, but many covenant couples told lively, colorful stories about God’s specific concrete actions to save and ‘prosper’ their marriages.

The stark contrasts we depict above are not seamless, however. Our qualitative interviews indicate a few instances of overlap in attitudes between covenant and standard spouses. For example, one standard couple was very similar in spirituality to our covenant couples. Each spouse had been previously married and the husband was 25 years older than his wife. At the time of interview, the wife was pregnant with their second child. They are active in their church and engaged in church

programming and leadership. They are acutely mindful of cultivating kindness, forgiveness and generosity in their relationship, seeing their marriage as a divine gift. But they did not covenant marry for complex religious reasons, feeling that it would be spiritually hypocritical because they had previously divorced and because covenant marriage legally only “puts a few hurdles there to jump over” and that “either you’re committed to your marriage or not.” Their core reason for choosing a standard marriage is very spiritual. The spouses feel that God and the Holy Spirit are present in their marriage all the time, but that their own human failings prevent their marriage from being holy. The wife said, “I’m not the perfect example of a wife,” and the husband said, “It’s very difficult to make [marriage] work out exactly to scripture. We just like to think that God forgives our shortcomings and that it’s better to be together than to be running off by ourselves.”

Conversely, a covenant married couple in which both spouses are lawyers chose the option for its legal security rather than spiritual import. They attend church infrequently and do not see God as either a partner or guiding presence in their marriage. The husband says, “I try to live my life right for the most part and I believe that has to do with my religion at least up to a point.” His wife reports that she is a religious person, “but not like the ones who go around knocking on everybody’s door.” They feel that divorce has become too easy and ruins lives. So, as the husband says, “Not that we are some big religious radicals, or some Right Wingers, we just sort of thought, ‘Hey, we really don’t have plans to get divorced anyway. We might as well sign up for the strongest contract.’” In her separate interview, the wife said briefly, “[marriage] takes a lot of work. We want to make sure we don’t get out of it easy.”

These illustrations of a practical, non-religious reason to choose a covenant and deeply religious reason to choose a standard marriage were the exceptions to an otherwise clear strong pattern of greater perceived religiosity and sanctification of marriage among covenant rather than standard couples.

Covenant marriage as a three-pronged signal

Of theoretical significance here, covenant couples believe that the covenant distinction conveys three important signals. All of the covenant couples mentioned at least one of the following three signals. First, covenant marriage serves as a strong personal signal of one's intentions toward fidelity as a spouse and servant of God. Second, covenant marriage signals that their personal commitment is of a higher standard than couples around them and that, for them, divorce will never be an option. Thus, covenant marriage signals their civic intention to strengthen marriage in their wider communities. Third, for the previously divorced, and particularly for emotionally devastated husbands, covenant marriage serves to manage anxiety about the chances of another divorce.

Signaling credible commitment to your partner and honor as a spouse. First and foremost, the covenants feel that their vows signal their mature seriousness to their partner and fidelity to God, both necessary signals in a culture with a weak marriage climate. As the young seminarian noted, covenant marriage “was the most public thing offered to us to show how extreme our commitment was.” A working class, disabled covenant wife noted that “Divorce is so easy now. Marriage is so easy now. You can get married and get divorced so easy. God is never going to leave us; and maybe that's what He's trying to say in a covenant marriage. That you'll never leave each other. No matter what, you'll never walk out. You'll just never make it that easy.” The young window washer husband and father talked about his covenant commitment:

“I think that it is sad that we had to make sure that this is a covenant marriage. Because that is what marriage is, it is a covenant, and it should not be broken. We take that very seriously, I take it very seriously, because going back to our relationship with God, I think He's the one that created man and woman, and He wanted them to procreate the earth, obviously. And then he set that in motion, and that is how it is supposed to be. So, he has given us that pleasure in partaking in this marriage. Save each other for each other, one man and woman for each other. For all of life, and just share in life and in your children, it is a take on what God intends, and I think that is very important. I do not take it lightly. When I made those vows, when I stood there and got married, it was very serious, and I knew what I was doing.”

Covenant marriage serves as an unusually useful signal of their sense of the sanctity of marriage and their spousal responsibilities. A husband said, “You’ve got to feel the sacredness of marriage all the time. You have to keep your marriage sacred within your heart.” A wife, explaining the value of covenant marriage, said, “I don’t want to do things that would intentionally hurt my marriage. I don’t want to hurt my husband, but then furthermore, I don’t want to hurt God. Because I know that we made that decision to come together before God. So, if we broke it intentionally, I would be breaking it with God.” Thus, most view the covenant choice as tangible evidence of commitment to their spouse and to marriage as an institution, and as an earthly manifestation of their divinely interconnected responsibilities to their spouse, marriage, and God.

Several respondents also acknowledged that covenant marriage served to remind them of their commitment, particularly in troubling times. One older previously divorced covenant wife in her mid-60s said jokingly, “We were gonna honor [the covenant] no matter what happened, other than us beating each other to death physically.” This elderly couple keeps their covenant marriage license on their refrigerator as a concrete reminder of their commitment. One 31-year old wife said, “[Covenant marriage] is good for the fact that it just makes you realize that your marriage is forever, because so many people just get married and think, ‘If it doesn’t work out, we’ll just get divorced.’ I like how [covenant marriage] makes you realize that there are other ways to get around your problems rather than divorce.” Another covenant wife in her 50s explained, “We took a look at the different kinds of marriages, and we thought the covenant would be more Biblical, more spiritual, in the sense that we were totally bound to one another to be married and to really make an effort to stay married and to really commit. One time we got into an argument and I looked at him and I was like, ‘We have a covenant marriage,’ you know? It’s like, ‘We’ve gotta work this out.’ It’s just a stronghold in our life that we’ve got a covenant marriage.” For these couples, covenant marriage helps them

symbolically lock into their commitment and focus on problem-solving and marital coping, rather than dwell on the possibility of separation.

Signaling a civic intention to honor and strengthen marriage, one marriage at a time.

Covenant marriage also affords these couples a direct, meaningful way to make a public stand against what they see as a culture of divorce. Thus, covenant marriage integrates their feelings about the sanctity of marriage with a civic impulse to instruct others about this personal conviction. As the originators of Louisiana's covenant marriage law intended, the covenant married want to convert couples to a vision of lifelong, unalterable marriage one couple at a time, beginning with themselves. They see this public signal of their covenant marriage as benefiting their children and society. As one 48-year-old, working class covenant husband who is in a remarriage said about why he feels evangelical about covenant marriage, "You know, Rome was tore down from within, not from without. I think the same is true for the United States. Our whole country is built on families, and if we don't turn our families around then we will be in serious trouble." One covenant wife said of her children, "I want them to know how it is to be in love and to still be in love no matter how long you've been married."

An excellent representation of this civic philosophy comes from a discussion by a remarried covenant wife in a blended family composed of children from both spouses' previous marriages and one child from their current union. She mentions her concerns about declining marital standards, people's lackadaisical, self-serving attitudes about commitment, and their complete contemporary ignorance about marriage as a sanctified relationship with God. She says,

"I just think there needs to be more effort to make people aware that [covenant marriage] is available. I believe that a lot of people are looking at it and saying, 'No way, if this doesn't work, I want out.' You know, 'This is too hard to get out.' I believe the standard of our world has gone down to that point. I don't believe people realize that when they do get married even without a covenant marriage licenses, they make it a covenant. But covenant, they really don't know what that is anymore. It doesn't mean anything to them, it is not legally binding. What's wrong with legally binding today? They don't realize that they made a covenant not only with their partner, but with the Lord. And they don't realize they're breaking that.

People just honestly don't know anymore. They don't know anymore. And, unfortunately, it's not being taught in our churches.”

A young husband in another covenant marriage affirmed this philosophy, noting “At first I was like, ‘Why do I need to sign a piece of paper when I know that in my heart that there is no turning back?’ Our standards were so much above that. But we talked about it and we came to the conclusion that we are willing to show how high the commitment is. At first I was like, ‘My commitment is before God, not necessarily man,’ [but we wanted to show] that our standards are higher.” These couples see their covenant marriage as a public signal that sets them apart from couples who lack a sanctified understanding of commitment to marriage and God.

Signaling safety and trust in a world of risk. Last, for people with troubled past relationships, especially for emotionally devastated husbands, covenant marriage serves as a very potent signal of trust against the risk of divorce. Those with psychologically damaging divorce experiences see covenant marriage as essential for their ability to take a leap of faith into a new marriage. They talked at length about the symbolic benefits of covenant marriage for binding the spouses more permanently, representing a spouse's intention to submit to God (and the husband), and, most important, creating a space to nurture (or pretend) trust in a relationship in which trust has not yet taken root. Covenant marriage becomes a powerful signal that distinguishes the new marriage from the pain of a previous bad marriage and scathing divorce.

As one evidently deeply bothered covenant husband said,

“[In my first marriage], I never had a say-so whether or not I wanted a divorce or at least go to counseling. You know, and I was willing to go to counseling and try to work it out for the kids. And she was like, ‘That's it. I want out.’ And so I felt there were two things I wanted. One is I wanted to have a believer of the same faith as me. And two, to have a covenant marriage, to have at least some type of *insurance policy* where we would at least attempt to work it out and not just say, ‘Hey, I'm gone. You don't have a say-so.’”

He has been crystal clear in his explanation to his wife about what covenant marriage means to him.

As she says, “His wife hurt him. It devastated him. He's already told me, he says, ‘You leave me, I

will probably just kill myself.’ He can’t cope going through what he went through again. He’s already told me, he said, ‘If you ever have an affair, just don’t even bother coming home.’ So, I think commitment is hard. I think commitment is just hard.”

Several covenant spouses mentioned signaling trust and talked about the debilitating effects of their own, their spouse’s, or their parents’ divorce experiences. In the previously mentioned covenant marriage that survived a husband’s arrest for sexual solicitation, the wife had wanted a covenant marriage because she felt that her husband had been careless in his first marriage and she was hurt at the age of 3 by her parents’ divorce and her father’s subsequent remarriage three months later. She wanted to signal to her husband that marriage was permanent and that she did not want any “back and forth stuff.” Another very young covenant wife and mother mentioned that her husband wanted a covenant marriage because of the pain he suffered as a result of his parents’ divorce. She said that her own family tree has no divorces, so she could not relate to his concerns, but knew that “it was so painful in his childhood and he never wanted his kids to have to go through that or himself or me.” Last, an unemployed husband in a remarried covenant relationship in which both spouses experienced divorce, said, “We both knew how easy it was to get out of our first marriages. I knew she was mature, I thought I was, and we didn’t want to have the easy way out. It was me telling her, ‘I’m in this for the long haul. This is the vow. It’s not just a quickie do at the JP and we can get out of it in a couple months, if we’re not happy. This is a commitment.’” Covenant marriage serves as a signal that the new marriage is permanent and safe. Covenant marriage gives couples a tool to cope with the emotional aftershocks of their troubled personal histories.

Conclusions

Covenant couples are more religious, attend church and religious events more frequently, and incorporate religiosity more fully into their daily routines. They also are much more likely to believe in the sanctification of marriage and demonization of divorce. Among the more religious standard

married, spouses are often mismatched and heterogeneous in their beliefs, eclectically cobbling together spiritual elements from several strains of thought or denominational experiences.

Covenant marriage also has great significance as a multi-faceted signal. Foremost, covenant marriage serves as a prestigious marker of maturity and commitment. Covenant marriage also signals the couple's civic impulse to strengthen marriage and fight the forces, demonic or otherwise, which weaken what they see as God's plans for families. Last, for those shaken in faith or confidence by experiences with divorce, covenant marriage signals trust. These latter individuals use covenant marriage as a symbolic means to "clean the slate" and enter a new marriage untainted and untouched by previous failures. Thus, covenant married individuals are mindful and self-aware about the signaling functions of their choice. Spouses jointly, proactively use the covenant marriage signal to foster a shared intimate understanding of their private marriage and public responsibility.

These findings seem to indicate that the covenant marriage option has uniformly positive effects for these highly religious, evangelical, and usually fundamentalist couples. After all, covenant marriage provides a concrete language to describe their perceptions of the symbolic relationship between their marriage, God, and society. On the other hand, the psychology of religion literature suggests that this intense focus on the covenant status of their marriage may have unintended negative effects. Schumm, Jeong and Silliman (1990) found negative effects of fundamentalism on marital quality, particularly when fundamentalism was tied to rigid, legalistic conflict resolution styles, verbal coercion, and low tolerance for a spouse's imperfection.

We did find some evidence of these problems among a few covenant couples in our interviews. The most extreme example is the working class couple in which both spouses are remarried and the husband wanted a covenant marriage because he had experienced an unwanted divorce. This husband envisions an angry, stalking God, one who directed him into a near-fatal highway truck accident in order to "put him on his knees" and wake him up about his sinful, drunken

nature. This rigidly fundamentalist husband banished his new wife's teenage daughter from their home because he considers her an ungodly sinner. He also placed many restrictions on his disabled wife, expecting her to maintain exacting cleaning and cooking standards and to nurse his elderly mother who he moved into their home without consultation. He restricts her access to money and prohibits her from being alone with any man, including service repair people. He prohibits any Sunday market activity, including shopping for necessities or dining at restaurants with friends or family. And he criticizes her often and publicly for her poor appearance, poor faculties, and failings as a wife. He expects *his* convictions, no matter how difficult, to be *her* unquestioned convictions.

His unrelenting criticism has left her bewildered and unsure of herself, her God, and her marriage. Reflecting on her struggles to submit to her husband, and her mounting inner turmoil and rebellion, she shared, "There are just some people, religiously, that they're just happy. They're just joyous. They're just exuberant. They're just excited. And I'm like, 'What is wrong with these people?'" She believes that she has a "heart of garbage," and that she is now far removed from the time when her husband first "chose" her and she felt like they were the "king and queen of [their] church." His interpretations of fundamentalism and covenant marriage are a torment to his wife and disruptive to their marriage.

Religious studies also indicate that passive or self-denying religious coping styles have negative effects on marital well-being. Self-neglect may harm marital well-being, if the spouses focus more on submission to God to the exclusion of an acknowledgement of their personal needs (Pargament 1998a). Also, when facing marital instability or an impending divorce, a collaborative religious coping style, with its focus on a combined search for spiritual and other help with direct appeals to God through prayer and meditation, is associated with better marital outcomes than a God-deferring coping style in which a spouse passively awaits God's intervention (Pargament 1998b). In

fact, God-deferring coping styles, and demonic reappraisals of the marital stressor, are associated with less competence in problem solving and more negative outcomes (Pargament 1988, 1998).

Covenant marriage does not guarantee immunity against marital problems or divorce. So, covenant spouses that use a God-deferring coping strategy for conflict resolution may suffer needlessly. Further, during marital crisis, a spouse may fare poorly if she or he perceives marital problems as a sign of the Devil's power, or as a personal failure to please God, or, worse yet, as a betrayal by God. Even a small shift in a spouse's adherence to religious practice or religiosity may be seen as highly threatening.

A divorce by a young covenant married couple during the course of our study illustrates the potentially corrosive effects of heightened religiosity, God-deferring coping, and negative reappraisals. This young couple met at eighteen and married shortly after in her church, with both spouses intent on having children and pursuing missionary work. They quickly had two children. During this time, the husband quickly became disillusioned by formal religion and engaged secretly in drug-taking and womanizing, fathering a child extramaritally. He moved out when his wife discovered his infidelities and the couple struggled with religious counseling, until the husband rejected his wife and her church, angrily saying that he was sick of her pastor blaming him.

At the conclusion of our study, they are at a stalemate. They separately affirm that they will not divorce because they are covenant married, but they are so traumatized that they cannot reconcile either. Besides her feelings of betrayal and hurt, the wife also feels humiliated by what she sees as an attack on her spirituality and a public shaming by her church community. As a consequence, she cannot bring herself to cooperate with her separated husband about child visitation, though she longs for him to father their children and even incorporates his non-marital child into her family as her children's half-sibling. Her ambivalence about what she sees as his violation of his covenant

paralyzes her coping skills. Though grateful for support, she is mortified that she must turn to God to “be the Father to the fatherless and the Husband to the husbandless.”

Likewise, the husband feels like a complete failure because he had wanted to be a spiritual head and the “umbrella over [his] home.” Thus, for self-protection, he has negatively reappraised his wife, her family, and her church as hypocrites. He still loves her, but believes that they will never reconcile because she will never accept him. He says, “I’m not that Holy Roller. I’m not missionary-minded. I’m not kissing the church’s clerical asshole, so I can excel in the ranks of leadership and be there with the rest of those people who make me sick.” Their divided feelings about religion and the sanctity of marriage hindered their abilities to address their serious problems. They are emotionally overwhelmed by anger, dread, and shame directly caused by their sense that they failed God by failing their marriage. Thus, some covenant individuals who face serious marital troubles may need help to establish a more forgiving sense of religiosity and more benevolent appraisal of God and their spouse.

Even so, this case aside, we mainly interviewed covenant couples who use collaborative religious and marital coping strategies. They focus on mutual respect for each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and a strong interest in marriage education and enrichment. Spouses commonly share a lively engagement with each other’s ideas, opinions, and feelings, and a tender fondness for each other’s basic humanity. They report a benevolent appraisal of God’s covenant with them, usually explaining that God wants their joy and prosperity. And clearly, these couples derive gratification and a sense of empowerment from the civic service they feel that they provide with the example of their covenant marriage.

It is important to recognize that covenant marriage is an emergent alternative family form, brought to light by legal reforms. Very few individuals choose, or even know about, covenant marriage. Thus, we must further study why this specific group feels the covenant option has such

potency for their self-identity and sense of public responsibility. The wider implications are that a signaling perspective may be useful to study other emergent alternative family forms, such as gay marriage. In fact, covenant marriage and gay marriage may have striking parallels that could be drawn out by a signaling perspective. For example, the covenant married and gay marriage advocates represent marginalized groups who seek access to the mainstream, while questioning its morality and justice. Further, both the covenant married and gay marriage advocates want a signal of commitment, not only for a partner, but also for the public. Both the covenant married and gay marriage advocates want a civic signal to express and validate how society would benefit from tolerance of their marriages. It would be sociologically significant to examine points of convergence and divergence in the public messages they struggle to convey with their active redefinitions of marriage as an institution.

We close with this illustration because we believe that most studies of alternative family forms examine their internal meanings and mechanisms, without attending to how the actors see their roles in the larger polity, culture and society. Research on family change may benefit from expanding beyond the private processes of relationships, through the exploration of the signals people use to convey their beliefs about their “fit” in society. The covenant married are able to explain with great clarity their sense of place in the world of families. Accordingly, we believe a signaling perspective would advance family change research by illuminating people’s views about how their family and intimate choices situate them in their family histories and wider communities.

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Table 1. Indicators of Denominational Affiliation, Religious Participation, Religiosity and Spirituality.

	Covenant	Standard	N, Covenant	N, Standard
<i>Shared Denomination and Fundamentalism</i>				
Both Evangelical	78.2%	36.0%		
Both Non-Evangelical	9.3	28.3		
Not Mutually-Shared	12.5	35.7		
			248	286
Both Fundamentalist	33.3%	13.1%	243	298
<i>Shared Religious Participation</i>				
<i>Both report that:</i>				
Pray Several Times a Day	36.8%	11.8%	253	304
Attend Church Every Week	51.4%	13.2%	253	304
Always Attend Together	57.7%	30.4%	253	303
Religion is Core to Celebrating Holidays	43.5%	17.9%	216	207
<i>Shared Religiosity/Spirituality</i>				
<i>Both report that:</i>				
Religious Faith Extremely Personally Important	61.3%	19.1%	253	304
Extremely Important that Spouses Feel Same Way	54.5%	14.1%	253	304

Note. Across all indicators listed above, differences between covenant and standard married couples are significant at the .05 level.

Table 2. Religious Attitudes about Marriage and Divorce.

	Covenant	Standard	N, Covenant	N, Standard
<i>Attitudes about own marriage</i>				
<i>Both report that:</i>				
God at the center of our marriage	44.0%	13.9%	216	208
We turn to God for help in our marriage every day	19.4%	9.6%	216	209
God would definitely be disappointed, if we divorced	42.0%	16.9%	181	172
We try to set a good example for others with our marriage	28.6%	10.6%	213	208
Some people think it is strange that we have more respect for marriage than they do	40.2%	20.8%	179	173
<i>Attitudes about marriage as an institution</i>				
<i>Both report that:</i>				
Marriage is a blessing from God	46.2%	20.1%	182	174
Marriage is an unbreakable covenant with God, not just a contract	53.7%	15.9%	216	208
Marriage is a lifetime relationship, and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances	61.8%	35.3%	254	303
Divorce is painful because of the loss of God's blessing	19.6%	11.5%	214	208
Divorce destroys God's divine gift of marriage	24.2%	9.8%	182	174
The Devil is trying to ruin the American family	38.8%	10.1%	214	208
Divorce is the Devil's way of destroying God's sacred blessing of marriage	28.9%	10.3%	180	174

Note. Across all indicators listed above, differences between covenant and standard married couples are significant at the .05 level.