THE AGREEMENTS WE MAKE TO OURSELVES WHEN WE'RE HURT MATTER



by Matthew Potter MEd, LCPC

In 2014, I was hired by CCCC. I recall buying some books related to 'Christian Counseling' and even one that was 'Basic Counseling Techniques'. It was the latter book that contained one concept that has stayed with me 12 years later. It is a 'clinical insight' I pay attention to as part of my overall approach in counseling. The concept is a simple word - *Agreement*. Applied in counseling, it can also go by the names: inner vow, promise or core conviction. One thing I have read about an agreement or a vow, is that it can be a response to a form of threat and this type of agreement is what I want to place focus on. Agreements made during times of stress, pain and even traumatic situations are defense mechanisms to help one cope. For instance, if you were harmed or wounded, the formation of the agreement does not have to be conscious - it does not have to be some declaration. So, a silent agreement can go unnoticed yet can become a pervasive characteristic trait. The agreement can also be known and it can be something you are proud of as well. Yet it becomes more of a shield or armor than a true coping mechanism.

An agreement will often begin by declaring what you *'will not allow'* and/or *'what you will expect'*. *"I never let _____happen again". "I will always _____ from now on".*

I made a point for a psychological concept that could be deemed useful in counseling, but what is so 'special' about this discovery? What's special about this concept is that an agreement that is unknown, undiscovered and ultimately was intended to be short-term and not long-term coping, can and does cause a lot of distress in one's life. The Christian life is supposed to be surrendered to the will of God and an agreement/inner vow can move us in the opposite direction, establishing a rule for the future based upon what happened to us in the past. An agreement can become a self-imposed law. Instead of seeking the Lord on how to respond to our wounds, our hearts have already decided how we will always respond. This is not God's will, we have established our own will as the governing rule in an area that should be surrendered to Him (Piper, 2026).

Let me introduce a man in his late twenties who cannot figure out why he would freak out so much on the urgency of a friend's response to another person's comments. He is 'freaking out' over some undetermined health issues. His responses to life's uncertainties is not proportionate to the information he's receiving. He has put urgency into his life once again. To his surprise and my own, the agreement that was 'hidden in plain sight' was he had a fear of being misunderstood ever since he was adolescent. A situation at that age helped him form the most significant agreement of his life. I have to be understood at all times or the uncertainty of the situation can remove my ability to control (have some control) over my life. It was not about the control. We all would like the ability to be in full control of our lives and yet we mature, learn the Serenity prayer and try to accept that we cannot control (cannot change) every aspect of our lives. Because he valued being understood so much as a result of being misunderstood for 'too long', this man made an agreement with himself that set off a clinical level of distress.

Let me introduce you to another man. This man is in his sixties and he wonders about his anger. He pieces together a narrative that he did not have a dad and he grew up in tough streets. He felt he had to grow up fast and to him, that meant he had to fight. He had to fight because his mother told him when he was young, he had to man up. So, he learned to fight and hold his own. He learned to warn people not to 'poke the bear' but if the bear came out, he would argue and unleash his anger. Later as a Christian, he did not want to live this way and yet the

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agreement was like a ticking time bomb. He was too 'hard wired' and he did not know how to 'defuse or cut the wire' of the anger waiting to explode. The agreement in this case is two pronged. First, his agreement was, 'I have to fight or stand up for myself to survive.' And second, 'I will give you a chance to not force me into a fight.' Remorse of being 'sucked into a heated confrontation' distorted his perspective and he felt he had no other choice but to fight once fully engaged. He ultimately paid the price of not being at peace with himself or the people he confronted/ confronted him.

In addition to being forced to 'man up' at a young age, he was a hands-on learner in school and when he didn't get answers correct, he was shamed. This added fuel to the agreement he made with himself. Some 50 years later, he is still vulnerable to others criticizing his work. He also does not like the critic, wise guy or bully who laughs at the expense of others. He becomes a fighter for those whom he feels are being mistreated. Yet the response is a mixture of anger, shame, disgust and anxiety. In this situation, the 'righteous anger' usually leads to a confrontation and the 'fighter' misses the mark because he feels he has to teach the person a lesson.

Figure 1 is a diagram of Dr. Bob Schucts's Anatomy of a Wound. It offers a visual representation of how emotional wounds can manifest and develop in a person's life. The innermost circle is the emotional wound, which usually occurs early in life as a result of abandonment, abuse or any other traumatic experience. The second circle depicts lies and beliefs. Based off of our wounds, it distorts how a person may view themselves, others or God. The outer circle depicts our inner vows. It is our protective mechanism again further pain or our attempt to cope with our emotional wounds and beliefs (Insight Anchors). This diagram demonstrates how there are deeper roots to the struggles people face like the examples given.

Losing one's peace is usually the consistent thread that results when one forms an agreement out of a wound or pain and does not eventually surrender that to the Lord. An agreement that is not filtered through a Godly lens does not have the full discernment of the Holy Spirit. It has the high probability of being self-serving and defensive in nature.

In closing, I am grateful that a small concept like 'agreement or inner vow', when eventually discovered and then filtered through God's grace, can bring about peace. As Jesus reminds us, his 'yoke is light'. Agreements, that have long stopped being beneficial in our lives, do need to be brought to light and given over to God. ■

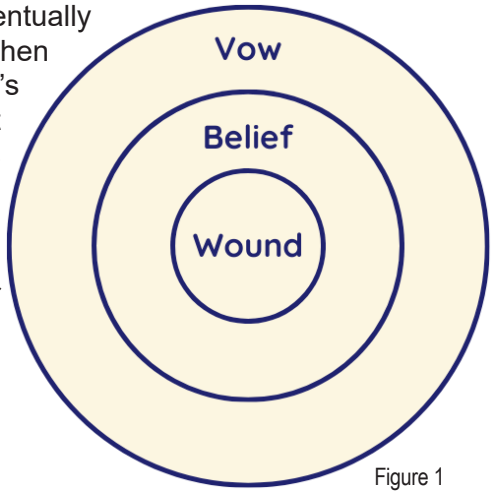


Figure 1

Piper, Lisa. "Breaking Inner Vows: How 'I Will Never' Can Become a Spiritual Stronghold." Driven to be Free, 1 Oct. 2026, URL.
Lanahan, Marcel. "The Anatomy of a Wound According to Dr. Bob Schuchts." Insight Anchors, 2026, URL.

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