

UNITED WISDOM

Fidelity: What Exactly Do People Promise Each Other?

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

“Deliberate mind.”

Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, II.XI.IV, concluding passage, printed page135; short fragment from A. C. Campbell. Source. The context concerns signs of an accepted obligation; the fragment establishes no current law.

What this article is about

Imagine a hypothetical scene: two people have lived together for years. One plans a weekend with friends, including someone with whom there was once a romantic history. The other says, “We promised to be faithful.” The first answers, “I’m hiding nothing and don’t intend to change our relationship.” Both may sincerely use fidelity while meaning different things: no sexual relationships, a particular circle of meetings, openness about significant information, priority for shared plans, or a constant inner orientation towards each other.

Until meanings are named, the dispute looks like a faithful person fighting an unfaithful one. Before assessing an action, however, establish what promise existed, who gave it, and how the other understood it. This article examines explicit and implied agreements, freedom within an accepted commitment, and honest revision of terms. It establishes no universal couple model. Classical sources pose limited philosophical and religious questions; present decisions belong to those who will live with their consequences.

I. Fidelity does not yet describe a promise

Some words seem ready-made agreements because they evoke strong recognition. Fidelity is one. Yet a familiar word may mean different actions. For someone, sexual exclusivity matters most; for another, the absence of a hidden emotional alliance; a third primarily hears a promise not to disappear during difficulty. These meanings sometimes connect. Sometimes the difference emerges only after an event one considers ordinary while the other sees a violation of shared life’s foundation.

In the hypothetical scene, ask what was said earlier. Was meeting former partners discussed? Was there a promise to discuss travel beforehand? Or did both accept only a general relationship label? Do not shape the answer to the desired outcome. “We did not discuss this”

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differs from “We clearly agreed, but one now wants something else.” Lack of detail does not prove no expectation existed; an expectation does not prove the other accepted its full scope.

Begin with your understanding: “When we discussed fidelity, I thought these trips were excluded.” The statement contains an experience and a view of the earlier conversation. The other can then recover their meaning, without an obligation to accept the first version. If memories diverge, that is the fact currently established. Discussion may need time, earlier messages, or acknowledgement that available information cannot support a confident shared account.

Clarification should not erase an obvious promise through endless exceptions. If someone clearly accepted a particular restriction, saying “We didn’t define every possible event” does not cancel the known part. Equally, details cannot be reconstructed retrospectively merely because the present event hurts. Two forms of honesty are needed: remembering accepted terms and acknowledging what stayed unclear. Neither follows automatically from the strength of conviction.

II. Feeling, intention, and action have different limits

A promise can concern intended actions, but not every inner state is available in the same way. “I will not enter particular relationships” describes action. “I will never find anyone interesting” promises the absence of a future experience. Today’s sincere intention does not establish control over every impression tomorrow. Discussing fidelity therefore requires distinguishing an emerging feeling, how it is handled, and an action towards another person.

In *The Rights of War and Peace*, II.XI.II–IV, Grotius distinguishes reporting intention from a more definite obligation. This is a historical natural-law treatise, not current family law. We use only the question of what was expressed; the older logic of disposing of liberty supplies no right to own a partner.

Consider a hypothetical example: someone notices an acquaintance’s attractiveness and decides not to develop personal contact because they accepted a particular commitment. The impression is not an already performed action. Another may also value inner orientation; this concerns their values and chosen relationship model. But a claim about another’s experience requires knowledge, rather than mind-reading from a smile. Even a disclosed feeling and its subsequent course remain different pieces of information.

This does not justify every action through an uncontrollable feeling. “It happened because I became interested” describes part of the history, but does not answer the accepted-promise question. One can honestly say the former arrangement has become difficult and discuss the future. Difficulty alone cannot declare a past violation agreed. A feeling requires no

punishment for appearing; an action needs its own description, including choice, known terms, and consequences for another.

Some promises also depend on several people's actions. "We will always spend holidays together" cannot be fulfilled alone if the other chooses differently. Name your part: offer time, discuss the plan beforehand, decline another invitation after agreement. The shared result requires reciprocal participation. Clarification does not weaken the promise; it shows what each can undertake. If the plan fails, both parts can be examined, rather than blaming one merely because the expected event did not happen. Reliability concerns the word's actual scope, rather than the scope of hope.

III. The implied is not always invented

Relationships cannot discuss every detail in advance. People rely on habit, repeated decisions, known values, and words' ordinary meaning in their surroundings. An implied agreement may have a real history. Both may repeatedly have agreed on overnight travel and described this as part of their arrangement. But one person's habit or family custom does not necessarily become a shared term. Consider how an expectation appeared between participants, rather than only where it originated.

Consider a hypothetical example: one always reports being late because they consider it care. The other expresses thanks without understanding this as a mutual obligation. A month later comes an accusation of violated fidelity. Planning convenience, attention, and expected response can be discussed. But separately establish whether both accepted an identical rule. Voluntary action does not automatically create a return promise of identical scope.

Check the implied through available signs: previous discussion, decisions in similar situations, whether someone called a rule compulsory, and how the other answered. This is neither a judicial procedure nor permission to search personal correspondence without consent. Sometimes it is enough to acknowledge similar conduct without clarified meaning. A new conversation then establishes future terms, rather than necessarily proving guilt for a previously unknown meaning.

Distinguish incomplete discussion from deliberately maintaining convenient ambiguity. Someone may know the other understands a promise differently and avoid clarification to retain advantages of both versions. The article does not establish this motive from silence. It can be discussed where facts or personal acknowledgement exist. In any case, future agreement needs a meaning available to both; continuing a fog because it temporarily suits one person does not make understanding shared.

IV. Accepting a model does not cancel a person’s voice

People can choose different forms of shared life, but a form’s label does not determine every decision’s quality. Within any model, people can agree clearly or leave meaning unknown, respect refusal or obtain consent through threats. The article therefore does not divide couples into mature and immature by one characteristic. We examine particular terms: what was accepted, with what possibility of refusing, and how participants handle changing a decision.

If one wants exclusivity while another cannot promise it, attractive wording does not necessarily remove the difference. One cannot convince the first that their wish inevitably means backwardness, or the second that refusal inevitably means inability to love. Both can name a personally important form. Wanting it does not oblige the other to provide it. Compatibility still needs establishing; equal dignity does not guarantee matching wishes.

In the *Analects*, I.13, the philosopher Yu links fulfilling one’s word with the rightness of agreement. This is Confucian moral counsel within a hierarchical world, not a modern couple-consent principle. The limited comparison concerns the promise’s quality: demanding reliability does not remove the question of what was promised. The text’s social roles do not become rules for our hypothetical scene.

Where shared discussion involves punishment for refusal, the proposed practice is unsuitable. The exercise can stop; the article is not an instruction for responding to threats. Even when discussion is free, do not promise what you do not intend to fulfil merely to end an unpleasant evening. Temporarily calming someone and actual agreement differ. Honest absence of agreement may be difficult, but provides a more accurate basis for the next decision.

V. Fidelity does not require identical lives

Freedom within commitment does not mean a promise disappears when another wish arises. It means preserving one’s voice, judgement, and areas not submitted to shared decision. Sexual exclusivity alone does not establish identical views about art, friendship, work, or faith. A particular promise cannot silently expand into authority to approve every thought and meeting.

Consider a hypothetical example: someone takes up a sport and spends an evening with a group. Their partner feels lonely and requests more shared time. This may be a real question. But discuss time allocation where no other terms were accepted. Unfaithfulness adds an accusation whose content still needs establishing. Otherwise any independent activity becomes a violation, while promising closeness becomes a prohibition on having one’s own life.

Independence does not remove every consequence of shared decisions. If an evening was already promised for an important meeting, a new interest does not erase that promise. Propose a revision, explain why, and hear the response. The other can disagree. Freedom means naming intention and accepting responsibility for choice, rather than a guarantee that every new wish will receive approval and leave the relationship unchanged.

Describe areas separately: what we decide together, what we report because it affects a shared plan, and what each chooses independently. Different couples need not have identical maps. These can be revised. The distinction should not exist only in one participant's mind. It helps pose a precise question: does the new event change a particular commitment, or simply reveal that the other person is not an extension of ourselves?

Sometimes a free area needs clarification because its consequences affect another. A work choice may remain independent while a new schedule changes agreed evenings and expenses. Discuss the intersection, rather than putting the whole decision under shared control. Acknowledge independence and name the now-unworkable household agreement. Time and resources then need a new answer. Separating areas creates no impermeable walls; it reveals which part needs discussion. If the request expands, name its new scope instead of treating it as accepted.

VI. A religious promise has its own foundation

For some, fidelity concerns a religious vow whose meaning exceeds convenient shared life. Reducing this foundation to an individual contract loses content. Yet different traditions and particular communities need not understand vows identically. The article establishes no theological rule for every reader and does not assume partners share faith merely because they once spoke the same word.

In Matthew 5:33–37, Jesus's counsel connects oaths with directness of personal response. This is Christian religious teaching within the Sermon on the Mount. We compare it with clarity of speech without inferring universal family legislation. Nearby commandments are not used as hidden compulsory terms for readers.

If one considers a promise sacred while the other heard a secular agreement, name the difference. It may matter greatly for a shared future. Neither version can be declared more sincere beforehand. Nor can consent be obtained by presenting personal faith as an already shared fact. Explain what a vow means personally and ask whether the other accepts that meaning. The answer remains free even if painful.

Philosophical reliability, Confucian rightness of agreement, and Christian counsel about oaths intersect around speech, but have different grounds. Preserve this instead of creating one universal couple quotation. Readers may accept a source as personal guidance or simply as a

conversation partner. Moral respect for promises does not authorise speaking for another or automatically validate every method of compelling fulfilment.

VII. Terms do not change retrospectively

People change, learn, and sometimes can no longer sustain their former relationship form. This does not necessarily make the original promise false; it may have been sincere when accepted. Present change nevertheless needs stating. If someone silently begins acting under new terms, another keeps deciding under old ones. The issue concerns both wishing to change life and unequal access to the basis on which life is now arranged.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.3, Aristotle asks what happens to friendship as participants change. His answer depends on an ancient virtue ideal, rather than a ready-made instruction to separate or preserve every connection. The comparison is limited: past regard and present change need consideration together, without erasing either.

Consider a hypothetical example: someone is no longer willing to maintain agreed exclusivity. Before starting a new interaction, they can state this and propose discussing the future. The other can refuse a new format. No shared updated agreement then exists, despite an honest proposal. Possibility of change does not oblige acceptance. The old form may be unavailable while the new one is unsuitable; the article promises no third solution preserving everything desired.

Revision does not rewrite an already performed action. If a term was violated, later consent to a different future does not automatically make the past agreed. Fact, consequences, responsibility, and possible further life can be discussed separately. Nor should an old promise prove lifelong ownership. Honest change needs clarity and respect for consequences; it authorises neither disappearing from their discussion nor demanding that someone stop feeling according to schedule.

VIII. Checking a fact and continuously checking a person

When a promise seems violated, establish the subject. What happened? What term was accepted? What is directly known, reported, or assumed? No investigative technique is proposed. The issue is the quality of personal assertions. Anxiety or jealousy can be real without describing an event. Equally, no immediate proof does not oblige someone to consider the arrangement suitable.

Consider a hypothetical example: the opening trip became known only after the return. One calls it concealment; the other says advance reporting was never discussed. Recover circumstances: was a direct question asked, was a false answer given, was there earlier

agreement? A particular-message question is more available than “You can never be trusted.” Even after factual clarification, disagreement about desired arrangements may remain.

Checking every step does not automatically follow from wishing to restore reliability. Even where both temporarily accept additional information sharing, name scope, period, and revision. This is an editorial arrangements question, not a researched way to restore trust. More reports cannot be promised to create the desired inner regard. Nor can refusing a new check prove an earlier violation: these are separate subjects.

Someone may decide continuation without particular openness is unacceptable. Another may refuse these terms. The task then concerns acknowledging difference, rather than finding permission to control someone against their will. Right is used ethically here, rather than as a legal conclusion. Where threats or unsafe refusal exist, the shared exercise stops; particular assistance and protection lie beyond the article.

IX. After violation, promise and forgiveness differ

An established violation’s acknowledgement does not immediately restore the old relationship. Someone can truthfully describe an action, accept changed terms, and still not know whether living together remains possible. Another may forgive in their moral understanding without wanting continuation. People may also continue without considering pain gone. These distinctions form no required ladder of correct reactions.

Consider a hypothetical example: someone admits giving a false answer about a meeting. Participants discuss its effect on the shared plan and understanding of commitment. A possible new action, reporting similar meetings beforehand, addresses particular organisation without guaranteeing restored trust. Apology expresses regard for the past, while a fulfilled new term supplies information about present behaviour. Neither should be presented as complete proof of inner transformation.

Responsibility need not become endless self-blame. Yet “I already apologised, so it is closed” establishes no agreement from another. People can agree how to revisit the subject without letting it occupy every day. If there is no agreement, name that too. The article prescribes no preservation at any cost; consequences may lead to ending the old form even where an intention to improve is acknowledged.

Forgiveness cannot become compulsory payment for acknowledgement. Someone honestly reporting violation gains no right to a desired response. Honesty matters in itself, but its price cannot be another’s obligation to return to closeness. Possible future fidelity concerns understandable actions and sustained directness, rather than demanding that the past cease to exist. Another’s decision may differ from what was hoped while remaining theirs.

X. Returning to the weekend with friends

Return to the hypothetical trip. The first available outcome is understanding which promises matched, rather than finding a winner. Perhaps such trips were explicitly excluded; the question then concerns changing a known term. Perhaps only sexual exclusivity was accepted and meetings were undiscussed; a new significant question has appeared. Perhaps memories differ. Each version needs its own answer; one accusation cannot serve all cases.

Next, name present wishes. One wants the trip; the other finds it incompatible with their suitable relationship form. A different group, time, or separate plans can be discussed. Every option needs consent if presented as new shared agreement. Compromise is neither compulsory nor always available. Calm discussion may end in a clear divide; precision has not failed merely because agreement did not emerge.

If agreement is found, check its content in ordinary words. What does each undertake? What must be reported? What remains personal choice? When will terms be discussed if circumstances change? Proportionate use need not make a relationship an institution. It brings promises into actions where fulfilment can be seen, rather than only solemn wording. Inner regard nevertheless remains broader than a list of completed items.

Fidelity can contain freedom because a living person promises. They continue changing, thinking, and choosing while giving their accepted word significance. Another’s freedom remains too: hear a new meaning, accept, refuse, or end participation. Precision serves closeness when it does not become endless control. It distinguishes honest constancy from convenient silence, and honest change from action another learns about too late.

What this means in practice

If both freely wish to talk, choose one term understood differently. Each separately describes their former understanding and its basis: exact words, repeated actions, or acknowledgement that grounds are unclear. This is an editorial reflection, not therapy or a way to prove violation. It is unsuitable where refusal or stopping is unsafe.

Separate three lines: what we consider agreed, what we implied differently, and what we propose for the future. Do not fill in another’s intentions. Where memories conflict, leave a line open. Frame the new proposal as action or a participation limit, rather than a guarantee of no future feeling. Both can name an inability to promise it; this does not yet accept another option.

If a new term is accepted, agree on a period or event for revision. Afterwards check what happened instead of inferring entire human worth from one action. Without agreement, record its absence and available personal decisions. The practice promises neither reconciliation,

restored trust, nor preservation of the couple. Its limited task is making the promise's subject available to both while distinguishing experience, fact, proposal, and accepted word.

Finally, check linguistic symmetry. Can each describe their part using the same understandable concepts applied to the other? This does not mean identical numbers of meetings or messages. It concerns access to meaning: a rule should not change meaning according to whose action is considered. If advance travel reporting applies to both, do not silently exempt your trip. Exceptions can be separately agreed. If unequal obligations are wanted, name the difference and check consent instead of hiding it under a shared solemn word.

Key quotation

> *"Good faith."*

Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, II.XI.XVIII, concluding passage, printed page142; short fragment from A. C. Campbell. Source. Only the moral question about personal word is retained, rather than all historical rules of obligation.

Connections between traditions

• Grotius, intention and obligation ↔ an editorial question about the promise: historical classification frames a question without establishing current couple law.

• Yu, rightness of agreement ↔ Matthew, direct response: attention to speech intersects while moral and religious foundations differ.

• Aristotle, changing friendship ↔ editorial future revision: past and present are considered together; the ancient virtue ideal prescribes no reader decision.

• Matthew, counsel about oaths ↔ Grotius, philosophy of obligations: comparison preserves differences between a vow and historical legal reasoning.

• Confucian fulfilment of speech ↔ editorial distinction of terms and control: reliability is not considered universal authority over a person.

Primary sources

1. Hugo Grotius, The Rights of War and Peace. A. C. Campbell; M. Walter Dunne, New York and London,1901; Gutenberg46564. Selected II.XI.II–IV,VI–IX,XVIII–XXII; this version omits chapters and is not the complete Latin original. Historical natural law, not current legislation.

2. Analects, I.13. James Legge, Gutenberg3330; Yu's saying and nearby context read, not the entire work. This copy's printed year is unestablished; no literal quotation.

3. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, IX.3. W. D. Ross, Internet Classics Archive; chosen section, not full book or Greek original. Printed edition unestablished; no literal quotation.

4. Matthew 5:33–37. Updated World English Bible,66-book protocanon; chosen verses and edition status, not all the New Testament. Religious counsel, not empirical study.

Tags

fidelity, promise, word, relationships, love, freedom, agreement, consent, exclusivity, expectations, intention, action, feeling, openness, responsibility, revision, change, vow, religion, directness, trust, jealousy, control, independence, boundaries, forgiveness, Grotius, Aristotle, Yu, Matthew, Confucianism, Christianity

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