

A Biblical View of Marriage

by Peter Carrell¹

A biblical view of marriage is necessarily a particular understanding of the Bible before it is a biblical view of marriage. The Bible is a small library of books invested by Christians as Holy Scripture in virtue of the writings known as the Old Testament (OT) being endorsed by Jesus Christ and the subsequent scriptures known as the New Testament (NT) being generated by Christ commissioning his apostles to preach the gospel .

In accordance with Christ's own interpretation, the OT is cherished by his disciples as the writings which foretell Christ's coming and the meaning of his life and death (Luke 24). The NT consciously draws on the OT (often in its expanded Greek form) to set out the accounts of Jesus' mission (the gospels), the expansion of the mission (Acts), and theological reflection arising from that mission (the epistles).

Holy Scripture thus is received by the church as a gift from Christ through the Spirit. The church has not 'written' the Bible in the sense that through subsequent ages it is entitled to rewrite it: Holy Scripture is God's written Word under whose authority the church exists. A biblical view of marriage, then, is a view of marriage developed within the pages of Holy Scripture as the church's rule or canon under which it lives.

Secondly, talk of 'a biblical view of marriage' presumes that we can talk about a coherent view through the Bible on marriage. An alternative approach is to speak of several (if not many) biblical views on marriage. Thus one might discuss the Bible's approval of polygamy (e.g. 1 Chronicles 3:1-5) or of marriage as a resolution of rape (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:28-29) or the possibility that incest is sometimes okay (e.g. Abraham and Sarah's story).

Certainly there is diverse, varied material on marriage and marriages in the Bible. Some passages are excruciating to our way of thinking in the 21st century. Yet care needs to be taken that we read the Bible as the Holy Scripture of the church. To overemphasize diversity of biblical material on marriage to the point of denying the possibility of a coherent biblical view of marriage questions whether we are receiving Scripture as God's revelation to us. The challenge of biblical hermeneutics is to find the coherent voice of God through the range of material lying between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21.

Since Holy Scripture is centred on Christ as its author, we look to Christ's own view of marriage as we seek a biblical view of marriage. First, Christ accepted marriage between a man and a woman as social normality, utilizing talk of marriage in sayings and parables, and participating in a notable wedding (Cana, John 2).

Secondly, we note that Christ endorsed the possibility of not being married as a valid style of life for his disciples (later affirmed by Paul, 1 Corinthians 7). In ways which challenge contemporary talk about 'Christian family values', Christ distanced himself from his own family and encouraged his disciples to love him to the point of 'hating' their own families.

Specific teaching given by Jesus about marriage was occasioned by questions posed about divorce and remarriage. On marriage itself, Jesus affirmed that God, having made humanity 'male and female' joins a man and a woman together in marriage as one flesh, a bond which once made no human should break. In this affirmation Jesus takes up through citation the language of Genesis' creation account, from chapters one and two (Genesis 1:27; 2:24). In other words, marriage is a man and a woman sexually uniting in a permanent, faithful relationship which establishes a new family.

Later in the epistles, Paul will continue the direction of this theology of marriage. First, in a critique of prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:16 directly citing Genesis 2:24) which is effectively a critique of all sexual liaisons outside of marriage.

Secondly, in practical advice for married couples, including advice about avoiding separation and divorce (1 Corinthians 7). Notable here is the manner in which Paul consciously builds on the teaching of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:10).

Thirdly, in Ephesians 5:25-32, where Paul manages both to direct husbands to love their wives (as Christ loved the church) and to teach the church of Christ's deep love for it. In a brilliant exegetical twist, Paul takes Genesis 2:24, the foundation of his teaching on marriage, and applies it to the 'mystery' of Christ's relationship to the church.

Thus in the teaching of Jesus and Paul on marriage we see a coherent biblical theology of marriage as each appropriates the foundational texts of Genesis 1 and 2, and as Paul appropriates the teaching of Jesus.

But, we might object, was not the foundational theology of marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 observed more in the breach when various polygamous marriages were made, both by patriarchs and kings? Indeed. But the New Testament is the lens through which the church receives and understands the Old Testament. Rightly Christians wonder how God tolerated polygamy in ancient Israel, but we do not find any NT endorsement of it as a variant biblical possibility for marriage.

A vexed question in relation to a biblical view of marriage is the question of divorce. Is divorce permissible for Christians? Can a new marriage after divorce occur as a blessed event? Or, as some argue, is a new 'marriage' after divorce not in fact a marriage but a continuing adulterous affair? Space does not permit engaging here with this and other questions raised by divorce in

respect of applying the Bible to modern life. But it does permit two observations. The clarity we find in Jesus and Paul's affirmation of what marriage is and should be, is not quite as clear in regard to divorce (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:7-13). However the slight lack of clarity regarding 'exceptions' should not be understood as some kind of fog out of which we may proceed in any direction which suits life in modern times.

Secondly, we should not confuse how we pastorally respond to the breakdown of a marriage with a biblical view of marriage. The fact of divorce does not change our vows. We vow to marry till parted by death, not by divorce.

The question of gay 'marriage' lies before us. It is not contemplated in the Bible which is resolutely 'heteronormative'. Neither Jesus nor Paul, when we take their reception of the OT seriously, would have contemplated endorsing the possibility of gay 'marriage.'

In my experience of debate over gay 'marriage' there is not, in the end, a serious effort being made to develop a biblical view of marriage which is inclusive of gay 'marriage.' Serious theological work evokes support from reason, experience, science, and an historical analysis of the church's shifting views on marriage (e.g. over whether or not potential for child-bearing continues to be a requirement for marriage). To the extent that the Bible is engaged in such discourse, there is invocation of certain details in the biblical narrative (e.g. emphasising marriage being for companionship), or attempt to render a biblical view of marriage as incoherent (e.g. there are multiple views which keep changing), or emphasis on a biblical view of 'inclusiveness'. What we do not find, for fairly obvious reasons, is an attempt to develop a biblical view of marriage beginning from Genesis 1 and 2, working through Jesus' teaching and Paul's, which affirms that it is immaterial to such a view what gender the two participants in such a coupling are.

A biblical view of marriage, understood as a view formed through reading the whole of the Bible as the church's Holy Scripture, affirms that God, having made humanity 'male and female', joins a man and a woman together in marriage as one flesh, a bond which once made no human should break.

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