

Does the Bible Give Us A Clear Definition of Marriage?

‘We all know that love is the answer’, opined Woody Allen, ‘but while you're waiting for the answer, sex raises some pretty good questions’ (Interview, *New York Times*, December 1, 1975). Questions, indeed. And before we even begin to answer that question - “does the bible give us a clear definition of marriage?” - we might want to ask this: “what kind of book is the bible, and how should we read it?”. The answer to that question will help us navigate the issue of “biblical marriage”. So, let us begin at the beginning, and with some words from Dan Brown’s bestselling 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*:

Teabing smiled. ‘Everything you need to know about the ible can be summed up by the great Canon Dr. Martyn Percy.’ Teabing cleared his throat and declared, ‘the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven...the Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book...More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only [four] were chosen for inclusion...The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great...’. [2003: Chapter 55]

Like so much else in Dan Brown’s novel, this is not quite right. But speaking as the person quoted above, I’ll try and clarify my views a little. It is true that ‘the Bible is not a fax from heaven’ is a quote correctly attributed to me, although to the best of my knowledge, I have only ever said this in lectures, radio, TV and newspaper interviews – and always in connection with how to understand fundamentalism. Furthermore, behind the slick sound-bite, there is a fairly sophisticated theological point. So let me explain.

Views about the authority of scripture cannot be directly resourced from the Bible itself. The bible has no self-conscious identity. As a collation of books and writings, it came together over a long period of time. Indeed, the word ‘bible’ comes from the Greek *biblos*, simply meaning ‘books’. Equally, the word ‘canon’ (here used in relation to scripture, not as an ecclesiastical title) simply means ‘rule’.

So the scriptures are, literally, 'authorised books'. The authorisation of the compilation took place sometime after the books were written. When Paul wrote 'all scripture is *inspired* by God' (2. Tim 3.16) in a letter to his friend, Timothy, he could hardly have had his own letter in mind at the time. The conferral of canonical status on his letter came quite a bit later – and some would say much later.

Views on the authority of the bible cannot be solely resourced from the bible. The bible needs to be held and understood in a particular way, independent of its content, in order to have any authority. For some (I'm thinking here of fundamentalists), the power of God must be mediated through clear and pure identifiable channels or agents. This guarantees the quality of that power: it is unquestionable and unambiguous.

But for others – usually of a more mainstream, broad persuasion – God acts and speaks through channels and agents that are fully themselves. So God works through culture, peoples and history, not over and against them. The almighty power of God is only ever known on earth partially (not absolutely); it can only be encountered 'through a glass darkly', and not 'face to face'. Yet.

So although the power of God may be pure and absolute at source, God *always* chooses to mediate that power through less than perfect agents (such as language, people, times and places). And this is because God's primary interest is in disclosing love in order to draw us into relationships, and not in unequivocal demonstrations of power, which would leave no room for a genuinely free response, and merely obedience in the face of oppression. So we have the burning bush for Moses – but he covers his face. And although Jesus is the light of the world, 'the darkness comprehends it not', according to John. What is revealed is still 'hidden' to those who are blind.

So, some Christians believe that scripture has come from heaven to earth, in an unimpaired, totally unambiguous form - like a 'fax'. Such views are fundamentalistic: the bible is the pure word of God – every letter and syllable is 'God breathed'. So there is no room for questions; knowledge replaces faith. It is utterly authoritative: to question the bible is tantamount to questioning God. So the bible here is more like an instruction manual than a mystery to be unpacked. It teaches plainly, and woe to those who dissent.

But to those who believe that scripture is a more complex body of writings, the authority of scripture lies in the total witness of its inspiration. Thus, the bible does indeed contain many things that God may want to say to humanity (and they are to be heeded and followed). But it also contains opinions about God (even one or two moans and complaints – see the Psalms); it contains allegory, parables, humour, histories and debates. The nature of the bible invites us to contemplate the very many ways in which God speaks to us. The bible is not one message spoken by one voice. It is, rather, *symphonic* in character – a restless and inspiring chorus of testaments, whose authority rests upon its very plurality. The scriptures are like sausages – delicious, nourishing and tasty – but you really don't want to see how they are made.

Yes, the bible is revered holy scripture. But blind obedience to all of scripture is not practised by any group of Christians known to me, or who have ever lived. Few Christians abstain from eating black pudding on scriptural grounds (Acts 15:28-29). Few Christians follow the Levitical texts on dress codes to the letter, if at all. I do know of Christians who object to clapping in worship (it is of the 'old covenant'; i.e., not mentioned in the New Testament). I know of other Christians who object to most kinds of dancing on the same ticket. Then there is slavery. Whilst not exactly praised to the hilt in scripture, it is condoned, and never censured - a fact not lost on the Confederate Christians who fought in the American Civil War.

Indeed, the recent HBO television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) gives us a rich and interesting insight into what 'biblical marriages' can look like. In Atwood's fictional Republic of Gilead, set in some future dystopia, the adult female population is divided between handmaids, Martha's and wives. The function of the handmaids was to bear children to the master of the house. Martha's are there to serve. Wives are to submit. This is a 'biblical marriage' pattern, of sorts.

Abraham thought he and Sarah could not have children, and so they turned to Hagar, their Egyptian handmaid (Genesis 16). Is this a biblical pattern of marriage? It is to such questions that the author Rachel Held Evans turned her mind some years ago in her bestselling and also rather controversial 2012 book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*.

Evans, intrigued by the traditionalist resurgence that had led many of her friends to abandon their careers to assume traditional gender roles in the home, Evans decided to try it for herself, adopting all of the bible's instructions for women as literally as possible - embarking on a radical life experiment, namely living a year of biblical womanhood. She grew her hair, adopted a "gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:4), covered her head, abstained from gossip, rose every day before dawn, made sure she "praised her husband at the city gates"(!), remained silent in church (of course), and also slept outside the family home during menstruation.

I have a hunch that the phrase 'biblical marriage' is similar to 'nuclear family'. It sounds biblical enough. Yet neither of these phrases is found in the bible. Perhaps that is why in 2014, my wife (Emma) and I responded with such alacrity to an invitation to write an introduction for the *NRSV Wedding Gift Bible*. It was a joy to write together, but in sending off the final text, I included a note to the publisher. I said that in the spirit of the *NRSV* translation, we had avoided using gendered pronouns for God, where possible. And we had also done the same for the individuals who were getting married. So you could give this bible to any couple. Yes, any. So two women, or two men, could receive the gift of Holy Scripture to celebrate their marriage. The bible is for everyone, after all.

I hold that each marriage is unique; each partnership distinctive; no two unions are the same. Two individuals make solemn vows of commitment to each other. It is the beginning of a journey in which each commits to being the faithful travelling companion of the other. God promises never to leave us; to accompany us and abide with us. Journeying is central. From Abraham in Genesis through to Paul in the New Testament, we read of men and women who have journeyed – trusting that God is their unfailing travelling companion.

The scriptures give us stories of better times in which blessings abound and individuals and communities know what it means to be loved and cherished by God. But they don't spare us the hard roads either. The scriptures also give us variety: pleasant places and rocky terrain; gentle rises and steep slopes. The goal of marriage is not merely to live life 'happily ever after'. But that rather, together, we commit to enjoying each other in the ups and downs that life brings – in faithfulness and love.

The bible, as the word of God, and as a single book, is a collection of scriptures that speak to us in many different ways about God, love and life. It is not one voice, but many; yet though many, one. And that one message is this: that God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them (1 John 4: 16). So the bible itself is a covenant sign. It is a marriage – a union of scriptures – that can only be understood in the totality of its witness. And that is partly why I am so committed to same-sex marriages. I see no reason why such unions cannot reflect the love of God, and bear testimony to God’s grace, truth and power.

I am always wary of groups or individuals who claim to be ‘biblical’, because in my experience, this kind of exclusive, tribal claim is exactly the kind of thing the bible doesn’t offer us. In fundamentalist worlds, it is never the bible that rules; it is always the interpreter. So that’s why we read scriptures together – because this is a shared journey of adventure and discovery in which the simple can confound the wise, and the foolish outwit the clever.

I know it is not easy for some Christians to see God at work in a same-sex marriage, and may never be able to. But these days a growing number can and do: they see all marriages as something to celebrate. They see that scripture does not lay down one pattern of marriage, like an instruction manual. Rather, marriage, like scripture, is a mystery to be unpacked over time. In ongoing contemplation and appreciation, it can be a real sign of God’s love and grace.

So scripture – like art, music poetry, symbols and signs – invites us to sit awhile and contemplate how God is revealed. The burning bush of Moses has no single meaning, and never could. The bible offers several patterns of marriage. A loving marriage is a sacramental token of love, and an invitation to pause and attend, stepping through the gate of mystery that God gives to us.

On the question of same-sex marriage, we may need reminding of one thing. God did not send us a fax. Instead, God chose to speak through Jesus - the body language of God - to remind us that God is ultimate love, and that those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. Sex raises some interesting questions, for sure. But so far as God is concerned, love is always the answer.

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