

What Does the Bible Actually Say About Marriage?

When you attend a wedding at church, what passages of Scripture do you expect to hear? Congregations occasionally invite me to speak on the current same-sex marriage debates, and I ask them this question. Their answers are remarkably consistent.

Someone invariably mentions 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "Love Chapter." Love is patient, love is kind, love never insists on its own way and so forth. Wonderful advice for marriage, but Paul was not talking about marriage. He was addressing a church fight: the believers in Corinth had split into factions and were competing for prestige and influence. We see echoes of this conflict throughout the letter, but especially in chapters 12 and 14, which surround this passage.

Others call out, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16; NRSV). Another moving passage, but it's certainly not about marriage. Ruth addresses this moving speech to her mother-in-law Naomi.

The second creation story in Genesis comes up: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). This passage is certainly appropriate to marriage, as it reflects the level of intimacy and commitment that distinguishes marriage from other relationships. Jesus quotes this passage, too, but he isn't exactly discussing marriage. Instead, his topic is divorce (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:8). When ministers read the Gospel passages at weddings, as they often do, the message seems a little off. I'd rather not hear about divorce at a wedding.

One other passage frequently surfaces in weddings but rarely in mainline Protestant churches, the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodists and United Church of Christ congregations that invite me to speak. Ephesians 5:22-33 commands wives to obey their husbands and husbands to love their wives. Conservative Christians may try to explain away the offense of this passage, but there's no escaping its ugly reality. Ephesians calls wives to submit to their husbands just as children must obey their parents and slaves must obey their masters. See the larger context, Ephesians 5:21-6:9.

Not a Lot to Say

The point is, Christian weddings rarely feature passages that directly relate to marriage. Only one passage, Genesis 2:24, seems especially relevant, while other passages require us to bend their content to our desire to hear a good word about marriage. Things are so bad that the worship books for many denominations turn to John 2:11, where Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding feast, to claim that Jesus blessed marriage. My church, the United Church of Christ, has developed a new wedding liturgy, but it retains this common formula: "As this couple give themselves to each other today, we remember that at Cana in Galilee our Savior Jesus Christ made the wedding feast a sign of God's reign of love."

So we know Jesus blessed marriage because he attended a wedding? That's the best we can do? No wonder it's common for couples to struggle over the choice of Scripture for their wedding ceremonies. The Bible just doesn't have much to say on the topic.

Let's Be Honest

Unfortunately, many Christians use the Bible to support their own prejudices and bigotry. They talk about "biblical family values" as if the Bible had a clear message on marriage and sexuality. Let's be clear: There's no such thing as "biblical family values" because the Bible does not speak to the topic clearly and consistently.

It's high time people came clean about how we use the Bible. When Christians try to resolve difficult ethical and theological matters, they typically appeal to the Gospels and Paul's letters as keys to the question. But what about marriage? Not only did Jesus choose not to marry, he encouraged his disciples to abandon household and domestic concerns in order to follow him (Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:28-30; Luke 9:57-62). He even refers to those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:10-13). Whatever that means, it's certainly not an endorsement of marriage. Paul likewise encourages male believers: "Do not seek a wife" (1 Corinthians 7:27, my translation) -- advice Paul took for himself. If neither Jesus nor Paul preferred marriage for their followers, why do some Christians maintain that the Bible enshrines 19th-century Victorian family values?

Let's not even go into some of the Bible's most chilling teachings regarding marriage, such as how a man's obligation to keep a new wife who displeases him on the wedding night (Deuteronomy 22:13-21), his obligation to marry a woman he has raped (Deuteronomy 22:28-30) or the unquestioned right of heroes like Abraham to exploit their slaves sexually. I wonder: Have the "biblical family values advocates" actually *read* their Bibles?

Christians will always turn to the Bible for guidance -- and we should. If the Bible does not promote a clear or redemptive teaching about slavery, that doesn't mean we have nothing to learn from Scripture about the topic. The same values that guide all our relationships apply to marriage: unselfish concern for the other; honesty, integrity and fidelity; and sacrificial -- but not victimized -- love. That's a high standard, far higher than a morality determined by anachronistic and restrictive rules that largely reflect our cultural biases. Rules make up the lowest common denominator for morality. Love, as Paul said, never finds an end.

Follow Greg Carey on Twitter: www.twitter.com/GregC666

Degrees/Education

B.A., Rhodes College, 1987

M.A., Vanderbilt University, 1995

Ph.D., Vanderbilt University, 1996

Greg Carey has taught at Lancaster Seminary since 1999, having previously taught at Rhodes College and Winthrop University. His publications include numerous studies on the book of Revelation and ancient apocalyptic literature, rhetorical analysis of the New Testament, and *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*. Courses in New Testament aim to prepare students as public interpreters of Scripture. Students engage Scripture not only in its ancient Mediterranean contexts but also as living documents in global conversations.

Greg blogs regularly for the Huffington Post religion section. A contributing editor to the Odyssey Networks' new lectionary resource, ON Scripture, he also serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Bible and Human Transformation* and *Out In Scripture*, an LGBT-friendly lectionary resource. Greg serves as chair of the Rhetoric and the New Testament Section of the Society of Biblical Literature and as co-chair for the Apocalyptic Literature Section of the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting. He has appeared in documentaries on the BBC, Discovery Channel, and National Geographic Channel, and most recently the 2011 BBC One documentary, "The Story of Jesus."

An Alabama native, Greg is a graduate of Rhodes College and Vanderbilt University (PhD, 1996). Greg is an active layperson in the United Church of Christ, who serves as Scholar in Residence at Lancaster's Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity. He lives in Lancaster with his daughters Erin and Emily.