Marriage, the New Testament, and pastoral ministry

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Abstract
There is a diversity of teaching about marriage in the New Testament. Opening up this diversity provides a pastorally more generous, and theologically more adequate, understanding of marriage than claiming, and then finding, an alleged unanimity of view. The article considers, in chronological order, the teaching of Paul, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, and the teaching of the later Letters on marriage, acknowledging the differences. It then suggests several pastoral benefits for ministry arising from the acknowledgement of the diversity of teaching.

Keywords
biblical marriage, eunuchs, household codes, marriage, pastoral ministry, queer

Biblical marriage
Many Christians seeking the mind of God, in this case regarding marriage, like to think there is a single essence that a right understanding of the biblical witness can correctly discern. The recent Anglican document Living in Love and Faith illustrates this approach well. The authors claim ‘a clear biblical picture of marriage emerges when you consider Scripture as a whole, and in particular when you read it in the light of the teaching of Jesus’.

1 There is a single ‘picture’ of biblical marriage, and a uniform teaching of Jesus about marriage, which is the lens for seeing the broader picture. A large collection of material is then arranged around these two assumptions. But it is unlikely that either assumption is true.
Tal Ilan offers another biblical picture of marriage. It was:

a commercial transaction between the father of the bride and the future husband in which a commodity (the woman) changed hands for a price (e.g., Gen. 34:12; Exod. 2:15–16); biblical society recognized as unquestionable a husband’s exclusive rights over his wife’s sexual activities. Wives had no equivalent claim on their husband’s sexuality; moreover, biblical society, instead of censoring and punishing male sexual aggression, punished the victim by making the raped woman marry the rapist (Deut. 22:29).²

Polygamy was expressly allowed and widely practised in the Hebrew Bible (from Lamech onwards; see Gen. 4.19). The very unattractive picture of biblical marriage may be the reason why Jesus and Paul could not commend it.

**Paul on marriage**

Paul’s teaching about marriage runs contrary both to later teaching about marriage in the New Testament and to its idealization in contemporary Christianities. His advice about marriage can be summed up in a single word: don’t.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is the world situation as he understands it. It is well known that Paul believed in the early return of Jesus (1 Thess. 4.16–17; 1 Cor. 15.51–52). But he also believed that there was a global ‘impending crisis’ (1 Cor. 7.26): ‘The present form of this world is passing away’ (1 Cor. 11.26, 31). Since Christ would rescue believers from the impending dénouement, proclaiming the gospel was more important than getting married. Marriage was low on the to-do list of believers’ priorities.

That was his extrinsic reason for discouraging marriage, but there were intrinsic reasons as well. He thought marriage was a distressing institution to become involved with, as it so often is. ‘Those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that’ (1 Cor. 11.28). It produces both anxiety and divided loyalties (11.33–35). Why are believers so reluctant to heed his advice? Don’t divorce statistics rather confirm his view? He thought a spouse was a distraction from more important matters. The only justification for marrying was doing something about lust, hardly the basis for a lifelong commitment of sacrificial love or respect for the personhood of one’s partner. There are no justifications of marriage in Paul about the procreation of children or benefiting from its sacramental character. ‘It is better to marry than to burn’ (11.8, KJV). ‘If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry’ (11.36). Marriage is a concession, a way of life that is second best, very far from accounts of it in the last 50 years that suggest the equality of spouses and mutual devotion.
Jesus on marriage

It is widely thought today that Jesus was in favour of marriage. In Protestant churches, it has become so commonplace that single people often feel alienated in congregations, arousing suspicions about their sexuality. A consensus of current scholarship is that Jesus regarded marriage as a ‘distraction’, but he accepted it as rooted in Jewish society. The earliest Gospel (Mark) records an incident where Jesus is asked ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ (10.2). Jesus offered no criticism of marriage in his reply, but, unlike Protestant and Orthodox churches today, he forbade divorce absolutely (10.2–12). In Matthew’s version, Jesus accepted his disciples’ response that it is better not to marry at all if divorce is forbidden (Matt. 19.10), observing that some of his disciples become eunuchs in order to be faithful to his teaching (19.11–12). He, like Paul, was intensely aware of a forthcoming catastrophe; also like Paul, he thought preparing for it was more important than marrying:

For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matt. 24.37–39, emphasis added)

Luke’s Jesus is even more forthright by dismissing marriage completely, teaching that a married man who separates from his wife for the sake of the kingdom of God gains rewards both in this age and in the age to come (18.29). Luke’s Jesus says:

Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. (Luke 20.34–36)

The context makes clear how radical the rejection is. Jesus is addressing a Jewish group – the Sadducees – who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. In this saying of Jesus, people who marry are citizens of this world, not of the world to come. They ‘belong to this age’. Their married status actually endangers their partaking in the age to come. The conscious avoidance of these sayings in many churches makes their legacy even harder to deal with. Some Protestant theologians find them too hard to treat so leave them alone. A lengthy, well-known and respected study on New Testament ethics ignores the passage, even in its section on marriage in Luke’s Gospel. I counted 47 biblical references in a tightly packed four-page text box entitled ‘Jesus’ teaching about marriage’ in Living in Love and Faith. But despite an exhaustive textual search for Jesus’ (not the Gospels’)

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teaching in the box, there is no discussion of the saying of Jesus in Luke 20.34–36. It is not possible for the authors to consider Luke’s anti-marriage stance. It would spoil the ‘clear picture’ of the unitary teaching of Jesus they are determined to paint. The sense of impending cosmic catastrophe, rather than an antipathy towards sexual relations within marriage, seems to be the main reason for avoiding marriage. In the case of Jesus, the mysterious figure ‘the Son of Man’ will appear (it may or may not be Jesus), ushering in the Last Days. In the case of Paul, it is Jesus himself who will appear. But such is the urgency of the end times – whatever they were thought to bring – that marriage, at least for many of the followers of Jesus, is a distraction from proclaiming the kingdom of God.

There were other, more pressing factors that may have led to Jesus’ view of marriage. Palestine was under Roman occupation, which was hated and generally cruel. The subjugated people longed for the overthrow of their imperial masters, resented the taxes levied on them, and had to face the constant likelihood of famine. These factors may have made survival and resistance more urgent than raising families. And there is another reason why Jesus may have discouraged marriage. He knew that it was a patriarchal institution in which women often came off poorly.

The later Letters on marriage

There is a long passage, the only one in the New Testament, where a first-century Christian understanding of the ancient institution of marriage is found (Eph. 5.21–33). In contrast to the reluctance of Jesus and Paul to commend marriage, here it is assumed.

The passage is embedded in a Household Code, and begins with an injunction to ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (Eph. 5.22). The hope that the opening verse is about to commend what is usually called ‘mutual subjection’ is quickly dashed. Three times husbands are told to love their wives (Eph. 5.25, 28, 33b). Three times wives are told to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5.22, 24b, 33c). There is an uncomfortable implication in this passage (and in parallel ones: see Col. 3.18–22; 1 Pet. 2.11—3.6) that is rarely allowed to surface in contemporary theological discussion. Mutuality is not on the agenda. Leading and dominating is what men do, and the Christian husband exercises his leadership by loving his wife. Marital love belongs to the husband only, as a function of his priority, or ‘headship’ in the marriage. The husbands do the loving, and the wives do the submitting or ‘fearing’. Wives, the author admonishes, are to ‘Be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord’. Jesus is reported elsewhere as saying ‘No one can serve two masters’ (Matt. 6.24). But that is exactly what Christian wives are required to do. In the Household Codes, ‘love was a courtesy extended by a superior to his inferiors, not an attribute of an egalitarian romantic attachment’. Nonetheless, the argument of the passage culminates in the ‘great mystery’ (Eph. 5.32), the mysterion that marriage can be, as it reflects the greater mystery – the relationship between Christ and the Church. The Latin Vulgate translates this term
as *sacramentum*, and the Church had good reason in the twelfth century to use the verse when it declared marriage a sacrament.

The ideology allowing husbands to dominate their wives has persisted for 2,000 years and remains one of the roots of domestic violence in many societies. Ephesians 5 is the high point of the New Testament’s endorsement of marriage. It is assumed in other Letters. Polygamy is excluded. Church leaders must have only one wife (1 Tim. 3.2, 12). So parlous indeed is the plight of women, due to the sin of Eve, that having babies is their means of salvation provided they also continue in ‘faith, love, and modesty’ (1 Tim. 2.15). Modesty of dress is a requirement of Christian wives, and submission to unbelieving husbands is the required tactic for winning them over (1 Pet. 3.1–6). 1 Peter doesn’t command husbands to love their wives. Husbands must ‘live considerately with your wives, bestowing honour on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life’ (1 Pet. 3.7).

**Some pastoral conclusions on marriage**

The tone of this article so far may be thought negative. Sometimes it is necessary first ‘to pluck up and to pull down’ in order ‘to build and to plant’ (Jer. 1.10). If there are assumptions that actually impede an appropriation of the Good News that the New Testament proclaims, then it is important they be pulled down. Acknowledging the rich diversity of biblical teaching allows new suggestions about marriage to be planted and shared in pastoral ministry. Here are six.

First, the present climate crisis perhaps enables us to see more clearly the urgency that shaped the thoughts of Jesus and Paul about avoiding marriage. That crisis is here already, and Paul’s warning that ‘the present form of this world is passing away’ helps us to appreciate that we, too, live in apocalyptic times – times when our priorities require to be reordered. Inspirational people are already putting the climate crisis before anything else, including marriage. Nowhere in the New Testament is there an obligation to have children. In less patriarchal societies it is now possible for married couples to share a ‘vocation’ jointly, whereas in earlier times the man only would be likely to follow one as a bachelor or a ‘single’ man. The saving of the planet is as great a crisis as any in the New Testament. Paul might be read now as summoning people to shape their lives in accordance with higher priorities than marriage and the demands of family life. Readers of this article probably already know single people or couples intending not to have children, in order to fulfil a perceived vocation stronger than the desire to marry. The strong option to avoid marriage speaks to them directly and they deserve pastoral encouragement for their countercultural objectives.

Second, for many people, Paul’s candid observation that ‘[t]hose who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that’ (1 Cor. 11.28) rings too true. Christians *recovering* from marriage might feel better reading these words as they seek to lay aside inflated expectations of married life. Christians *considering* marriage might become appropriately more hesitant. Jesus was scathing about
divorce probably because he knew that wives were subject to their husbands’ whims, and that being ‘put asunder’ could render an ex-wife impoverished, vulnerable and stigmatized. On a personal level, marriages based on unequal relations of power frequently descend into resentment, abuse and sometimes violence. On an historical and institutional level, marriage has been integrated into the capitalist organizing of work and the legal arrangements governing heredity, favouring men. While in some countries historical wrongs perpetuated by marriage are being put right, in other places the biblical warning against at least some forms of it deserves to be taken far more seriously. People who avoid marriage are as ‘biblical’ as people who take it up. Others may avoid marriage because their honest and evolving self-knowledge leads them to doubt their capability to be good and faithful spouses.

Third, the diversity of New Testament teaching about marriage might help the Church to minister more effectively in societies where there is a variety of kinship arrangements and a much later age of first marriage (for those who choose to marry at all). Instead of seeing the array of diverse family forms as a deviation from the one form that God uniquely authorizes, it is more positive to see them as creative ways of responding to vastly different social circumstances while preserving, at least potentially, the core marital values of sacrificial love, devotion and commitment. Not all of them reflect such values, of course, but neither do marriages.

Fourth, marriage in Ephesians allows for innovation. The required sacrificial love of husbands for their wives can and must be extended to include wives ‘giving themselves up’ for their husbands. It happens anyway. Reciprocal love and devotion are requirements of marriage now. But they are not requirements of Ephesians 5. Adding reciprocity to marriage is already an innovation. How could marriage be commended in the present century unless mutuality and reciprocity were preconditions, assumed in the exchange of consent? Wives can love their husbands as Christ loved the Church, even if it never occurred to this first-century author to say so. But the arrangements of the Household Codes are ‘in the Lord’ (Col. 3.18) – that is, they don’t simply replicate those of Jewish and Roman families. They positively allow for innovation. Christians who advocate same-sex marriage also argue that their marriages can be ‘in the Lord’. There is more to marriage than adhering to particular details of its historical practice. Understanding of marriage can deepen.

Fifth, the ‘mystery’ that is the union between Christ and the Church might provide more than a hint about the potential depth and fulfilment to be found in married love. Leaving aside the difficulty that the divine Bridegroom and the human Bride (the Church) have an asymmetrical relationship (Eph. 5.32), there are partnerships where partners administer their sacrament of marriage to each other in the many details of quotidian married life and are drawn into a deeper mystery as they do so. Once a couple understands that they are the co-equal co-ministers to each other of their marital sacrament, the presence of God in their lives takes on a new significance.
Sixth, even the saying about becoming eunuchs can be a missional aid. Becoming a eunuch ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ is, let us say, an exaggerated metaphorical description of living without the benefits of marriage – a sort of psychic and spiritual castration, but not an actual one. It is natural to regard the saying as hyperbole, like the sayings (in the same Gospel) about tearing out your eye or cutting off your hand. Origen (c.184–c.253) is the most famous theologian to take the saying literally. The practice of actual, physical castration was sufficiently widely practised among Christians for the Council of Nicaea to forbid it in AD 325.

Contemporary followers of Jesus might want to revert to similar metaphors (i.e. extreme, and painful even to think about) for several reasons. Remaining faithful to one’s partner cuts off sexual intimacy (if nothing else) with anyone else. But a new emphasis has recently been placed on the figure of the eunuch as a powerful countercultural icon.11 Eunuchs were liminal beings situated ambiguously between male and female. Their very presence in Roman society undermined Roman notions of masculinity as firm, upright and assertive. A eunuch was, and remains, a reminder that alternative masculinities – countercultural ways of being a man – are required of Christians in all modern societies, not just the societies of Jesus’ time. The reign of God needs more queer disciples, not fewer. Queer people do not require pastoral rebuke for being queer. They do require pastoral encouragement to ensure that their queerness furthers ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 19.12).

An obvious difficulty follows. Is the ‘rich diversity’ of teaching so diverse it becomes incoherent when considered together? I think it addresses the very diverse personal situations of Christians who are already living the faith in different ways throughout the world. The broader picture is the more ‘biblical’ one. It testifies to the sacramental depth of some marriages, while acknowledging that marriage is not a universal vocation by any means. It finds God’s grace in relations other than marriage. It upholds the values Christians discern in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, especially sacrificial love. It allows for innovation, especially hallowing those relationships open to the settled presence of God. It allows that there are higher priorities even than marriage. A recovery of biblical diversity over marriage would help the Church to refrain from using it in forlorn attempts to tell people when and with whom to have sex, and to keep marriage straight.

Notes

1. Church of England, Living in Love and Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), p. 281.
2. Tal Ilan, ‘Jewish women’s life and practice in the world of the New Testament’ in Benjamin H. Dunning (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 221–37, here p. 222.
3. Jennifer W. Knust, ‘Marriage, adultery, and divorce’ in Dunning (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality, p. 523.
4. See Luke 17.26–27.
5. Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: an inclusive approach to New Testament ethics* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 268–9.
6. Church of England, *Living in Love and Faith*, pp. 246–9.
7. The Household Codes are principles in the New Testament governing the relations, in households, between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves (see, in particular, Eph. 5.22—6.9; Col. 3.18–22; 1 Pet. 2.18—3.7). They were found outside the Church as well.
8. Knust, ‘Marriage, adultery, and divorce’, p. 529.
9. See, for example, Rachel Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage in Contexts of Domestic Violence: when salvation is survival* (Abingdon and New York NY: Routledge, 2018); Johanna Stiebert, *Rape Myths, the Bible, and #MeToo* (London: Routledge, 2019); Adrian Thatcher, ‘The harm principle and Christian belief’, *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (2021), pp. 5–24.
10. Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity: Christian marriage in postmodern times* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 239–41.
11. Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: masculinity, gender ambiguity, and Christian ideology in late antiquity* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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