

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



Biblical Values for American Families

– Rev. Dr. Jay E. Johnson*, Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, Pacific School of Religion

January 24, 2006

Modern families and biblical families share the word “family” in common, but not much more. So in order to find in Scripture the timeless values that can guide American family life, we need to look beyond the radical differences between the ancient world and our own. We need to read the Bible in a manner that is faithful to its spirit and honest about its content.

It is important to recognize, for example, that the most common marriage pattern in the Bible is polygamy; it is not a union of one man and one woman. Even in the New Testament, married life as we understand it is not presented as the model. The most prominent models of Christian life in the New Testament, Jesus and Saint Paul, were not married, and neither had children. Paul explicitly ranked being married below being single. And when Jesus was asked about his own family, his reply was radical: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:48-50). On this basis, the early church developed a model of family that broke totally with ancient kinship patterns, monogamous or polygamous. The family in the New Testament is religious and nonbiological; more than anything else, it is like what we might think of as the “church family.”

The Bible does not provide us with concrete examples that we can directly apply to marriage and family as we understand these relationships today. In fact, the examples of what some might refer to as “biblical family values” are deeply disturbing.

Abraham’s use of his slave, Hagar, to sire a child, and his subsequent banishment of Hagar and the child to the wilderness (Genesis 21:14) would be considered unspeakably callous by today’s standards. Yet, according to the family values of his day, Abraham was acting completely within his rights. When Jacob steals his brother Esau’s birthright, the Bible describes it not simply as an act of brotherly betrayal but as a necessary part of God’s will for God’s people (Genesis 27). Even more severe is Jephthah’s sacrifice of his own daughter to fulfill the terms of a foolish vow (Judges 11:29-40) or Onan being put to death for refusing to impregnate his late brother’s wife (Genesis 38:9).

* The Rev. Jay E. Johnson is a writer, an independent scholar, and an adjunct faculty member at Pacific School of Religion and the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, both member schools of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Since 2003 Jay has served as the Center’s Programming and Development Director; during Mary Tolbert’s sabbatical, Jay will serve as the Acting Executive Director of the Center. The courses Jay teaches at PSR fulfill requirements for the PSR Certificate in Sexuality and Religion (such as “Constructive Theology and LGBT Experience” and “Queer/Christian Theology”). Jay has published articles on the intersections of sexuality, spirituality, and Christian theology and, in 2005, his first book was published, “Dancing with God: Anglican Christianity and the Practice of Hope.” He also serves as a co-chair of the Gay Men’s Issues in Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion. In addition to his academic work, Jay is an Episcopal priest and serves as associate clergy at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, also in Berkeley. Originally from Chicago, he has lived in the Bay Area since the early 1990s.

Of course, not every biblical relationship is as dysfunctional as these examples. Interestingly, when biblical figures do act virtuously, they often do so outside the bounds of “traditional family.” The story of Ruth and Naomi, often read during marriage ceremonies, is a moving account of the devotion of two women (Ruth 1:16). David and Jonathan’s relationship is presented with a tenderness lacking in most biblical marriages; David admits that his love for his friend “surpassed the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26).

Religious opposition to marriage rights for same-sex couples frequently turns to the Bible for support. For example, one denomination has based its opposition to marriage equality on “the biblical teaching that God designed marriage as a lifetime union of one man and one woman.” But, as we have seen, this claim hardly reflects what the Bible actually says or the ancient cultures in which the Bible was written. The structures of biblical families are rooted in cultural practices far removed from the values of Christians today.

That does not mean, however, that the Bible fails to serve as a guide for Christian family values. As the institution of marriage continues to evolve with shifting cultural norms, the Bible calls us back to what truly matters in human relationships.

Saint Paul wrote about these values, calling them the “fruit of the spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22). These are biblical values that every Christian family should embrace. According to Paul, “love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Even when knowledge and human institutions fail, these values, Paul says, remain constant: faith, hope, and love. The greatest of these three, Paul concludes, is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Societal definitions of marriage and family have changed, and will continue to change, over the course of history. What the Bible presents as the abiding standard is not based on biology or specific forms of legal contract, but on the quality of love that is shared. That is why many Christians today believe that if same-sex relationships exhibit such spiritual values, they deserve the protection and recognition that marriage represents in our society.

If we have any intention of preserving marriage and building strong families, we must base our support on neither ancient practices nor those of secular modernity; instead, our basis must be values that are unchangeable—faith, hope, and love. These are the biblical standards for Christian marriage and Christian families today.