

No Mutual Joy: Response to Newsweek

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Even many religious conservatives want to be persuaded that they can believe in the Bible and support homosexual marriage. Lisa Miller (*Newsweek*, Dec. 15) raises their hopes in her opening sentence: “Let’s try for a minute to take the religious conservatives at their word and define marriage as the Bible does.” Religious conservatives would like to be taken at their word, for a change.

But the writer does not try. She says there isn’t any biblical definition of marriage, and the very idea is ridiculous. “Would any contemporary heterosexual married couple... turn to the Bible as a how-to script? Of course not...” Apparently Miller hasn’t heard about the countless numbers of couples around the world who benefit from doing exactly that!

“First, while the Bible and Jesus say many important things about love and family, neither explicitly defines marriage as between one man and one woman.” The writer never explicitly defines what she means by “explicitly defines.” However, the very first time the Bible speaks of human beings, the command to marry and bear children is made “explicitly.” (Genesis 1:27-31): “So God created man (*adam* – in Hebrew) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...’”

Humankind is not created “male or female,” nor does God first create them “male and female” only to decide later on that the man and the woman could also marry and have children. God creates marriage in the very act of creating humanity, in Genesis 1.

Genesis 2 “explicitly defines” marriage as one man and one woman – not with a “dictionary definition,” but by relating a story that draws a conclusion. The LORD God made the woman from the rib of the man “and brought her to him” like the proud father of the bride (Genesis 2:18-25). “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother, and they become one flesh.” “One flesh.” One flesh in sexual union, one flesh in babies, one flesh in family life – the one flesh that is human history, from generation to generation. Even marriages that do not give birth to children exist in accord with, rather than in opposition to, this definition.

Another “defining” moment is Jesus’ rejection of divorce as a violation of God’s original intention (Mark 10:6-9): “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” Jesus makes “one man and one woman” a matter of principle: “So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” A husband and wife need all the support they can get to maintain a stable marriage in which to raise the next generation. To depict gay relationships as comparable is to blur society’s vision of the common good.

Does Jesus ever speak against homosexuality? “Yes” is the answer, despite repeated claims to the contrary. Jesus himself proscribed homosexual practice when he condemned not only “fornication” (*porneia* - in Greek) and “adultery” (*moicheia* - in Greek), but also the “licentiousness” (*aselgeia* - in Greek) that elsewhere includes homosexual relations (see Mark 7:21-22 and 2 Peter 2:7).

Miller accuses religion of bigotry: “Religious objections to gay marriage are rooted not in the Bible at all, but in custom and tradition (and to talk turkey for a minute, a personal discomfort with gay sex that transcends theological argument).” If so, Jesus is included in the indictment, too. In his teaching on sex and marriage, Jesus, the Jewish rabbi, never departs from the Scriptures of Israel. The Gospels are consistent with the remainder of the New Testament, in which some of Leviticus’ laws are reaffirmed and reapplied to the new life in Christ.

“No sensible person,” asserts Miller, “wants marriage – theirs or anyone else’s – to look in its particulars anything like what the Bible describes.” On the contrary, the apostle Paul’s instruction to husbands in particular, that they “should love their wives as they do their own bodies,” has transformed marriages for the better (Ephesians 5:28).

The writer’s gratuitous insult exposes the vast difference between the church’s way of reading Scripture and her own. A helpful term for her approach is “historicize”: she reads “history” in order to “relativize” its claim on the present. Miller historicizes Genesis 2, for example, when she quotes Dr. Segal: “If you believe that the Bible was written by men and not handed down in its leather bindings by God, then that verse was written by people for whom polygamy was the way of the world.” “That was then, this is now” is how she reads the Bible.

Her approach imposes severe restrictions on the ways in which Scripture informs its hearers: “We cannot look to the Bible as a marriage manual, but we can read it for universal truths as we struggle toward a more just future.” Even a casual reader of the Bible quickly recognizes, however, that “universal truths” are uncommon. The “universal truths” are tightly woven into a particular story. Indeed, the “universal truths” are specific promises and specific commands to a specific people, Israel.

Instead of timeless wisdom that applies to every time and place, the church reads Scripture for the narrative that now includes us among the people of Israel’s God. To us, ancient, as well as contemporary practices are brought into focus through the lens of the whole story, from beginning to end.

Writers like Miller historicize the Bible in order to mute its authority: “The Bible was written for a world so unlike our own, it’s impossible to apply its rules, at face value, to ours.” “Rules” are not the main subject of the Bible, as Miller ought to know, and their “face value” depends on their location in the narrative. The degree to which the ancient world is unlike our own must not be underestimated – or overstated, either. Miller’s helter-skelter selection of examples is devoid of context and begs the question of continuity and discontinuity.

From the first page of Scripture to the last, marriage is the “gold standard” – the reality principle by which all sexuality is evaluated. Biblical prohibitions against fornication, incest, pedophilia,

bestiality, adultery, lust, divorce, and homosexuality are made from the standpoint of marriage. The fact that monogamy did not become the norm in the Christian world in the 6th century is no more to the point than the fact that Christians regularly fall short of the norm. The “one man and one woman” norm must be received anew in every generation, and in our generation is under intense assault from several directions.

The most important question to ask writers like Miller concerns Jesus. Is Jesus alive or dead? The answer is decisive to the reading of Scripture. It is difficult, if not impossible to receive “inspiration” from a rabbi who has been dead for 2,000 years. But the church believes that Jesus is alive and is coming to complete his Father’s kingdom on earth as it already is in heaven: therefore Scripture inspires us to know and to live for the world’s true and ultimate good. Is Jesus alive, or does Miller historicize Easter, too? It’s hard to tell what Miller believes, in view of her remark about what Jesus “would” do “if Jesus were alive today.” The church believes the future belongs to Jesus: that makes Scripture relevant, no matter how old it is.

Miller correctly points out that Jesus “preaches a new kind of community, a caring community of believers, whose bond in God superseded all blood ties.” So, too, she draws attention to the promise that in the resurrection there is no need for marriage, because life will be eternal and death will be no more (Matthew 22:30). But it is a spurious argument to defend homosexuality on this basis.

Marriage is a living image of the one-body-and-Spirit union of Christ and his bride, the church. St. Paul explains, “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.” Marriage prefigures the final consummation – “I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven as a bride prepared for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).

The strongest consideration is one the writer never considers: human frailty. We live in a world divided by sin and death, as well as circumstance. There might be social value in civil unions – independent of gender – that would extend practical benefits to unmarried friends who desire to form a legal association. Domestic partnerships could grant rights having to do with visitation, taxes, inheritance, and insurance benefits. Such voluntary associations could be beneficial to groups of widows, celibate clergy, or single persons in the absence of family – relationships that do not depend on sexual desire. At least it is worth some discussion. Domestic partnerships are friendships, not marriage and would not endorse behavior that many Americans deem wrong. It’s true, as she says, Jesus “does not want people to be lonely and sad” – but Jesus does not want people to sin, either.

All of us know that this response to Newsweek will be dismissed as “homophobia,” but such dismissals are unpersuasive and have lost their power to intimidate – as a majority of the citizens of California recently demonstrated.