

Don't the Old and New Testaments 'Diverge' Over These Issues?

The coming of Christ, and the teaching of Christ and his apostles, brings both continuity and discontinuity in biblical teaching about gender, marriage and sex.

It is often claimed that Jesus said nothing about same-sex relationships. But the same people who make this point often insist, rightly, that the few biblical passages on same-sex relationships must be seen in the wider context of the Bible's teaching about gender, marriage and sex. In this wider context Jesus has a great deal, that is highly significant, to say.

In Continuity with the Old Testament, Genesis chapters 1-3 are determinative for a Christian understanding of marriage

In Matthew chapter 19 Jesus is asked a question about divorce: "Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?'" (v3)

He refuses to answer the question without teaching about marriage. He turns them to the Old Testament: 'He answered, "Have you not read that the One who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female'.'" (v4; a quotation from Genesis 1:27) "and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'" (v5; a quotation from Genesis 2:24)

And only then does he draw his conclusion: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (v6).

Paul does exactly the same in Ephesians chapter 5, perhaps the most famous passage on marriage in the New Testament. He quotes Genesis 2:24, to explain both human marriage, and Christ's marriage to the church.

Continuity and Discontinuity: Christ's teaching is tougher and more demanding than the Mosaic legislation and most of the Old Testament. This represents, as we shall see, both continuity with the Old Testament and discontinuity.

Here in Matthew 19, the Pharisees ask him a further question: "They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?'" (v7)

Jesus answers: 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery' (v8-9).

In other words, he rescinds the Mosaic permission to divorce, except in one circumstance, but he does it in the name of God and of Genesis chapters 1 and 2. For the Christian, continuity with Genesis means discontinuity with the Mosaic legislation at this point.

In Matthew 5 vv31 and 32, Jesus does the same. He teaches: “It was also said: ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce’ (he’s paraphrasing Deuteronomy here) but I say do you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”. So Jesus is more demanding than the Mosaic legislation on the issue of divorce and of remarriage after divorce.

And Paul in 1 Corinthians 7vv10-11 unusually and directly quotes Jesus in this tougher teaching about divorce and remarriage.

Jesus is also tougher and more demanding about sexual temptation: “You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall not commit adultery’, But I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out ...” and so on (Matthew 5:27-30).

It is not, then, very likely that the Jesus who gave this tough teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage, and lustful thoughts is going to soften the Old Testament’s prohibition of same-sex relationships.

Discontinuity: Compassion is to accompany our insistence on God’s moral standards. This is a possible area of discontinuity from the Old Testament. It’s not that compassion is entirely absent in the Old Testament, far from it, but it becomes the hallmark of Jesus’ dealings with people, even when he says hard things to them, as with the rich young ruler.

The classic example over sexual matters is John chapter 8, the story of the woman taken in adultery. The law of Moses commanded an adulterer to be stoned. Jesus overruled this. He not only stopped the stoning; he refused to condemn her.

So if we follow Jesus, compassion must be the bedrock of our dealings with all who fail, and not only in the sexual realm. But, with Jesus, compassion always went with an insistence on God’s moral commands. His last words to the woman were: ‘Go and sin no more’. In other words, this sinful relationship must stop. If we follow Jesus, calling sexual sin ‘sin’ and urging people to break with sinful relationships, but doing this gently, compassionately and yet absolutely clearly, must be the essence of our pastoral care.

Discontinuity: Marriage is rendered more important in the New Testament than in the Old Testament because it reflects the Church’s relationship with Christ, and Christ’s relationship with the Church.

Paul says to wives in Ephesians 5: ‘Be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord’ (v22) and to husbands in: ‘Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (v25).

Marriage is honoured in the Old Testament; and of course marriage language is used of the relationship between God and Israel. But I don’t know of any Old Testament passage in which human marital love is said to be modelled on God’s love. This is precisely what the New Testament does say. So, if anything, marriage is more honoured in the New Testament than the Old.

Discontinuity: Marriage is rendered less important by not being part of the resurrection age.

In Luke 20, the Sadducees ask Jesus a question about the resurrection that they don't believe in (v27). Jesus begins his reply with these words: '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 any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection' (vv34-36).

After the Second Coming and the General Resurrection, people will not marry (v35). They will not marry it seems because they will not die (v36). And presumably the reason why those who will no longer die don't marry, the way in which they are like the angels of heaven (v35), is that they will not have children.

If this is indeed the reason, it links marriage even more closely to procreation, and therefore to the differentiation of the sexes, to marriage being between a man and a woman. but it does also mean that marriage becomes less important. It belongs, as Paul says, to the 'present form of this world' which is 'passing away' (1 Corinthians 7v31). However, this does not mean that in this world it is not to be honoured in line with the way that God created it. In the New Testament if we are called to marriage we prepare for the age to come by living out that marriage as God intended, as a faithful permanent union between one man and one woman.

Discontinuity: Singleness and celibacy are considered as good as, or even 'better than', marriage.

The great collection of Jewish teaching, the Talmud, is later than the New Testament but it quotes the rabbis as saying: 'The man who is not married at 20 is living in sin'. Hence the disciples' amazement in Matthew 19 when Jesus said that remarriage after divorce was not permitted.

But the New Testament speaks very positively about the single life. Jesus, speaking in the context of remaining single after divorce, says: 'There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 9:12). In other words, some have refrained from marriage and from sexual intercourse because of the moral demands of acknowledging Christ as our King. And Paul devotes most of a long chapter, 1 Corinthians 7, to urging singleness as a very live, and even a better, option, on those who have never married and on the divorced and the widowed.

See also: Are evangelicals unreasonably subjective in their selection of the Scriptures they keep and those they reject?