



Joyful And Ardent Labor In The Scriptures

Studying the Bible with humility and reverence.
Studying to get to know God in truth, then live accordingly.

Dad Decides for Daughter: Arranged Marriage and Mishandling Scripture

The purpose for this article is threefold:

1. to honor God by defending the Bible from a sincere but truly mistaken use of it
2. to halt and prevent other well-intentioned Christians from traveling this same hermeneutically errant road
3. to show why it behooves to ask your marital prospect what he or she means if he or she uses the term "biblical courtship"

Over a period of roughly thirty-three months a friend and brother in Christ proposed arguments for a distinctive kind of "biblical courtship" to my wife and me. Seeking our critique and feedback he also referred us to his extensive argumentation on the subject on the forum of an online Christian dating site.¹ On that site he defined his brand of "biblical courtship" in his prominent public post. To the end that I sufficiently represent this view of courtship I quote here in some length from that public post, altering the punctuation for clarity. A number of points are addressed afterward.

I am currently studying the relationship between biblical courtship, biblical betrothal, and a biblical marriage covenant and their relationship to the GOSPEL (Eph. 1:4-5; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-32). I have been working on this study for over two years.

. . . Scripture is the enemy of any culture that you put it in. This should come as no surprise when you factor in that the mass of humanity is made up of unregenerate, sinfully depraved men who are actively hostile towards God and his righteousness (Col. 1:21), they hate God and love sin (John 3:19-20). Why, then, would we be so surprised to find that what scripture teaches in reference to courtship, betrothal, and [a] marriage covenant is diametrically opposed to what our culture practices? What I see being taught in churches today is nothing more than syncretism, a blending of what culture practices with what scripture actually teaches. . . . What is taught as biblical courtship in churches today is nothing more than sanitized worldly dating. It is full of moralism but has no GOSPEL parallel, which is what you find with biblical courtship taught in scripture. . . .

It is a very dangerous position to take to state the scripture is sufficient and does teach us how to interact as husband and wife (Eph. 5:22-32; Titus 2:4-5; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Pet. 3:1-7) but is insufficient and gives us little to no information regarding the courtship process and how to get from being single to being married. . . .

My understanding of biblical courtship is derived from scripture. Courtship is between a suitor and a father, not a suitor and a daughter. Biblically, the suitor does not go to the father to request permission to "date" his daughter or "get to know her better" or "spend some time with her." Nothing like this is found anywhere in scripture. The vetting process is done by the father; the decision of "if" and . . . "whom" [his daughter marries] is his and his alone (1 Cor. 7:37-38). . . . If [her

father] is no longer living, someone else fills the responsibility. Every single marriage in scripture is an arranged marriage for the woman, with one exception. That is the power of systematic studies.

. . . The daughter does not choose a husband . . . whom she can agree to submit to; that is Arminian freewill theology. Her husband is chosen for her by her father; that is biblical election. . . .

. . . The father has authority over his daughter until she is married to a husband or until [her father] dies. In [her father's] absence, others act on her behalf but she is still passive. Scripture nowhere strips a father of the authority he [has over his daughter; rather, his authority over her is transferred to her husband]. . . .

. . . A father cannot biblically delegate [to his daughter] the decision of [whom] . . . to marry. . . . The vetting process and decision is on the shoulders of her father and him alone. Her father has authority over her; with that authority comes responsibility; with that responsibility comes accountability before God. It is not within a father's ability to transfer his authority, responsibility, and accountability before God to someone else. That all comes from God and cannot be changed by man. . . .

Biblically, the man seeks/pursues; the daughter is passive and courtship is between the father and the suitor. The [suitor] submits himself to the daughter's father during the vetting process and exposes himself to possible rejection from [her] father.

Accused of poor interpretative principles by another member of the online Christian dating site community, the brother submitted a number of questions on the matter to me. The following is an edited form of our Q & A.

Q. The gap between today and the times in the Bible presents challenges to proper interpretation, but we are prone to use that as an excuse for not conforming to and applying what we should. Would you agree?

A. Logically the unregenerate in general, the stubborn, the stiff-necked, and even the careless Christian "are prone to use [the ancient cultures, manners, and customs in Scripture] as an excuse" not to submit to Scripture; but I would hope mature, teachable, honest Christian Bible students strive to be mindful of and guard against their own theological pre-understandings and biases as they labor in the Word to get to know God and apply His Word properly to their lives.

Q. I see parallel relationships between Christ and the Church and a husband and wife (Eph. 5:22–33). I also see a parallel between the betrothal of the Church to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2) and the betrothals of couples in Scripture. And I see a parallel between the doctrines of election and predestination (Eph. 1:3–14) and the arranged marriages in Scripture. Do these parallels actually exist or am I imagining things?

A. If the goal of interpretation is to determine what the author consciously intended to convey to his original audience by his words and grammar, then whatever parallels we might see in the text are irrelevant. To go beyond authorial conscious intent is to move from exegesis and objectivity into eisegesis and subjectivity, and that is the very method of interpretation that for years had me seeing all sorts of "deeper truths" in the Bible before my method was corrected.

If the penmen of Scripture have made no conscious connection between x and y, then to preach perceived resemblance between x and y as divinely intended resemblance or to cite perceived parallelism as divine evidence of doctrine is to preach and teach our own

formulated ideas or judgments.

Q. "I see parallel relationships between Christ and the Church and a husband and wife (Eph. 5:22–33)."

A. Comparisons between the two are indeed made in the passage but limited to the following:

- submission (vv. 22, 24; cf. "she respects" in v. 33)
- headship (v. 23)
- love (vv. 25, 28, 33; cf. "nourishes and cherishes" in v. 29)
- self-sacrifice (v. 25)
- oneness/unity (v. 31 in the context of vv. 28–32)

Those are the points of comparison consciously (or explicitly) intended by Paul, for note his use of *hōs* and *kathōs* ("as" and "just as") in Eph. 5:22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 33.² But the processes which unified husband and wife and Christ and the Church are *not* compared. And we have no exegetical ground for handling Eph. 5:22–33 as though Paul intends his imagery to be treated as if it assumes comparisons of prearrangement, courtship, or betrothal.

Q. "I also see a parallel between the betrothal of the Church to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2) and the betrothals of couples in Scripture."

A. Second Corinthians 11:2 contains historical nuptial imagery *in the context of apprehension about seduction by another Jesus*. Paul "promised" the Corinthians to Christ but was fearing interference with their loyalty to Christ by false teachers. Isolating 2 Cor. 11:2 from 2 Cor. 11:3–4 not only misses the point of Paul's imagery but belies its intent.

The context is decisive: neither in words nor by implication is Paul teaching us today how to pledge one's faith to another for marriage. To extract ideas of that nature from 2 Cor. 11:2 is to extract only what has been read into the text.

Q. "And I see a parallel between the doctrines of election and predestination (Eph. 1:3–14) and the arranged marriages in Scripture."

A. Paul was not drawing nor did he intend his readers to draw a parallel between predestination and arranged marriage. I state that without hesitation because the words, grammar, and genre of Eph. 1:3–14 communicate nothing of the sort. To read out of an ancient text what the author intended to communicate to his original audience requires us to *limit* ourselves to the words, morphology, and syntax preserved in that particular document, factoring in the genre and the literary devices and the essentials of its historical setting. To make connections not explicitly made in the document by the author himself is to step outside the bounds of legitimate exegesis. (If the author or another consciously makes a same or similar point elsewhere in Scripture, then that is a different matter, for that could be used as a cross-reference.)

If the genre of a text in the Word of God is not allegorical or analogical then we sin against God by interpreting the text that way. "Thus means the LORD" when the LORD means otherwise is precarious proclamation (cf. Deut. 4:2, 12:32; Prov. 30:5–6; Jer. 23:28; Rev. 22:18–19). The exegete is to bring out the author's intent, not bring it into analogy.³ What Paul does at Gal. 4:23–31 is for the exegete to interpret, not model (for we are not "moved by the Holy Spirit" in the sense that Paul was [2 Pet. 1:19–21 with

3:14–16; cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17]).

Q. I use the first-mention principle (a.k.a. the law of "first mention") to draw as much as possible from Genesis 1–3. Am I wrong for doing so?

A. If by such you read into a text more than what the author consciously intended to convey to his original audience by the words and grammar of that text, then yes, you are in the wrong. Or if you come away from a text with implications or principles inconsistent or incompatible with or repugnant to either the conscious intent of the author or the context, then that, too, would be wrong.

For example, "and [the LORD God] brought [a woman] to the man" in Gen. 2:22 is not a principle for arranged marriage. The conscious intent of Gen. 2:22 is preserved in its words and grammar, and neither the words nor the grammar nor the context of Gen. 2:22 pertain to parental authority, arranged marriage, or passivity on the part of the woman.

The first-mention principle⁴ is a questionable if not dubious law at best. An author's intended meaning of a word, expression, or utterance at its first mention in Scripture cannot and does not overrule the various contexts which define that same word, expression, or utterance in subsequent uses.

Q. I go through Scripture systematically and glean as much as possible wherever mention is made of fathers giving daughters, husbands taking wives, betrothal, marriage, etc. Am I wrong for doing so?

A. If by such you read into a text more than what the author consciously intended to convey to his original audience by the words and grammar of that text, then yes, you are in the wrong. Or if you come away from a text with implications or principles inconsistent or incompatible with or repugnant to either the conscious intent of the author or the context, then that, too, would be wrong.

One of my instructors cautioned about compartmentalizing Scripture (e.g., topical studies, systematic theologies) as the intended point of a text can be missed or exaggerated by isolating certain components from it.

Q. If fathers had a certain God-ordained authority in the OT, did they lose that authority in the NT? If they still have that authority in the NT, do they have it yet today or did they lose it somewhere over time?

A. The question, rather, is whether God instituted, commanded, or enacted the practice of fathers deciding if and to whom they give their daughters in marriage as seen in the biblical narratives or whether He simply accepted and tolerated the practice as it existed.

Scripture indicates the originator of the marriage customs encountered in its narratives is fallen humanity in a fallen patriarchal culture. Genesis 24 with 25:20 and Gen. 29:15–30 with 27:46–28:2 give cultural insight into the giving of daughters/taking of wives in Gen. 4:19, 11:29, 21:21, 25:1, 26:34, 28:9, 38:2, 6, 41:45; Exod. 2:1, 21, 6:20, 23, 25. Daughter-giving/wife-taking was long in place in the ancient Near East before Israel's practice was *regulated* by the LORD in Exod. 22:16–17; Lev. 18:6–18, 20:14, 21:1–15; Numbers 36; Deut. 21:10–14, 22:28–29, 24:1–4, 25:5–10 (cf. Gen. 38:1–11).

But that the LORD tolerated and regulated a practice does not mean He commended the practice.

To promote today a brand of arranged marriage or "biblical courtship" grounded on and reflecting ancient Near East customs that would at times seem to leave a woman's honor, feelings, and personal preferences essentially out of the equation (e.g., Gen. 34:1–24; Josh. 15:16–17; Judg. 15:2; 1 Sam. 17:25; Esther 2:3–4, 8)⁵ is to promote an abuse of male headship. It is to promote male conduct that hardly accords with the imperatives to "treat people the same way you want them to treat you" (Matt. 7:12) and that fathers not rile their children (Col. 3:21). Robert L. Reymond notes,

The world of the Old Testament was a patriarchal world. Originally [in the pre-Fall Edenic condition] its patriarchy was a perfect patriarchy [cf. 1 Cor. 11:8–9; 1 Tim. 2:13]. . . . After the Fall patriarchal culture continued to prevail by divine design (see Gen. 3:16) but with many injustices toward women occurring due to mankind's fallen state [e.g., Gen. 12:10–20, 19:6–8, 20:1–18, 26:6–10; Judg. 19:23–25, 21:20–23; and 1 Sam. 18:27, 25:39–44; 2 Sam. 3:2–5, 14–15, 5:13, 11:26–27—David's sins of polygamy and adultery incessantly violated Abigail's right, if not Michal's right, to a monogamous, inseparable relationship with David (Gen. 2:24)]. Nevertheless, God continued to honor the original patriarchal arrangement of Eden, even in its corrupted character. . . .

How can we explain God's willingness to recognize and adapt himself to a *sinful* patriarchal culture? The answer is to be found in what our Lord said about the hardness of men's hearts (Matt. 19:8). Just as God permitted men to put away their wives for light causes in Old Testament times due to the hardness of men's hearts (which divorces entailed many injustices toward these women), so also he adapted himself, *in form but never in principle*, to the albeit-corrupted patriarchal culture of the Old Testament which wrongly held that it was the male who had superior worth. God as Teacher came to the "students" of the fallen ancient world where he found them, in ethical ignorance, accepted for a time this ignorance because they were not able to bear instantly total and radical change, and began to instruct them in a true ethic and to prepare them for the coming messianic age in which it would be recognized that the man and the woman were all along heirs together of the grace of life. Never being satisfied with where his pupils were, he always insisted that they mature and forsake more and more their evil thoughts and ways and seek more and more his holy thoughts and ways.⁶

Q. I put a lot of emphasis on 1 Cor. 7:36–38 because it is so extremely clear, and we interpret the not so clear with the very clear. Do you understand 1 Cor. 7:36–38 differently than I?

A. First Corinthians 7:36–38 must be read in the light of the phrase that opens 7:25: *peride* ("now concerning"; cf. 7:1, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, 12). The church in Corinth had written to Paul about certain things, and 1 Cor. 7:25–38 is Paul's *opinion* (v. 25) on the matter of virgins.

Correctly handling 1 Cor. 7:36–38 requires 1 Cor. 7:34–35. Paul gives the basis for his opinion for singleness (vv. 34–35), but (*de*, v. 36) supposing a particular case (*ei* + the indicative *nomizeis*, "if [anyone] thinks")⁷ he acquiesces with two *permissive* imperatives ("let him do . . . let them marry").⁸ Paul is not teaching that fathers decide whether or to whom they give their daughters in marriage; he is, at the Corinthians' request, stepping into the Corinthians' practice regarding their virgins (v. 25), opining for singleness but acquiescing to the will of the one who "thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin," supposing such a case. Paul's tone in v. 39 (cf. Rom. 7:1–3) is a distinct shift from his tone in vv. 36–38.

Note that the text in several versions (e.g., CJB, ESV, NEB, NIV, NJB, NLT, NRSV, REB, RSV) reads 1 Cor. 7:36–38 in the sense of "a single man deciding whether to marry the woman to whom he is engaged" (see the Study Note on 1 Cor. 7:38 in the NET Bible). First Corinthians 7:36–38 is not as clear as one might think. And for a suitor today to give a woman and her father only the one view that supports the suitor's position is truly to act with dishonesty.

May I close by saying that if a father and his daughter today are nonetheless both on board with arranged marriage, then I do not believe her father arranging for such would *per se* be sinful. But that is not because I believe any line of teaching for arranged marriage can be derived from Scripture through sound interpretative methods.

Notes

¹ I have withheld the name of the site because it does not necessarily agree with my brother's conclusions.

² The five verbs in Eph. 5:26–27 ("He might sanctify," "having cleansed," "He might present," "having," and "she would be") are ultimately all in reference to the purposes or results of Christ's giving up of Himself in behalf of the Church.

³ This is not to say biblical narrative cannot be used to *illustrate* biblical doctrine.

⁴ See J. Edwin Hartill, *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1947), 70–72.

⁵ Widows resigned themselves to levirate marriage (Gen. 38:1–26) and daughters were sometimes given in exchange for service (Gen. 29:15–30) or "awarded" to men for heroism (Gen. 41:38–45; Exod. 2:15–21 [perhaps]; Josh. 15:16–17; 1 Sam. 17:25).

⁶ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 938n50.

⁷ See James L. Boyer, "First Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?" *Grace Theological Journal* 2.1 (Spring 1981): 75–114, accessed October 13, 2014, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/02-1_075.pdf.

⁸ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 488–89, DVD-ROM (BibleWorks, LLC, 2008).