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Taking Back The Bible

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Taking Back the Bible

BY MARK I. WALLACE

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS. Abortion. Contraception. All three are under attack by religious conservatives who say biblical teachings are on their side. Some faith-oriented Republicans think cultural warfare about social issues will doom their party to irrelevancy, but many values-based conservatives believe the soul of their party is at stake. For them it is crucial to battle social liberals in the public square lest the foundation of Western society, the traditional family, be undermined. And so religious conservatives' ongoing denunciations of marriage equality, equation of abortion with murder, and opposition to contraception on religious liberty grounds continue apace. Groups such as the Family Research Council and the Faith and Freedom Coalition—inheritors of the Moral Majority mantle—soldier on to defend traditional ideals of marriage and family in a shifting cultural landscape.

During the recent presidential election, Billy Graham was one of the many spokespeople for this position. Arguing that “there are profound moral issues at stake” in the election, the Rev. Graham urged readers to “vote for candidates who support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman, protect the sanctity of life, and defend our religious freedoms. The Bible speaks clearly on these important issues.”

Unfortunately for the Rev. Graham and other conservative Christians, however, the Bible says little, if anything, about the politically charged issues he and his ilk champion, and what it does say runs counter to their right-wing assumptions.

The Question of Marriage

Ralph Reed of the Faith and Freedom Coalition says permitting same-sex marriage will “undermine the cultural good of the family unit.” Citing the Bible, he says marriage equality and family well-being are mutually exclusive. For Reed and others, the biblical ideal of marriage is exclusively monogamous and heterosexual, and any threat to this ideal destabilizes a cornerstone of civilized society. While right-wing Christians' one-man-one-woman paradigm is an important scriptural value—this model is upheld by the story of creation, some of Jesus's teachings, and the household rules for couples inspired by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament—the Bible also upholds the sanctity of polygamous relationships: the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and the great kings David and Solomon all had more than one wife. Moreover, Jesus and Paul, while valorizing monogamy at times, are also eager to champion celibacy, with Jesus highlighting the value of voluntary celibacy in the Gospel of Matthew, and Paul saying it is better to remain single than to marry in 1 Corinthians. Just as important, their lives spoke volumes on this issue: both Jesus and Paul were single, signaling, arguably, that this is the supreme



An anti-abortion protester brandishes a cross at abortion rights advocates during a “March for Life” in Ontario, Canada. Why is this a common sight, when the Bible says nothing about abortion?

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Two men exchange legally unrecognized wedding vows at the Episcopal Church of the Atonement in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. “The Bible contains no prohibitions against mutually affirming LGBT relations as practiced today,” Wallace writes.

ideal of the true believer. For Jesus and Paul, healthy living consists of freeing oneself of family entanglements and living the life of God’s obedient servant. The Bible, then, endorses three views of marriage—monogamy, multiple wives, and celibacy—assigning no preference to one model over and against any other.

My suspicion, however, is that conservatives’ defense of marriage is a stalking horse for a wider cultural argument about why homosexuality in general and marriage equality in particular are bad ideas. The Southern Baptist Convention and the Family Research Council’s public condemnation of the Boy Scouts of America’s recent decision to admit gay members makes this corollary argument clear. Standing strong for conventional marriage means that one is anti-gay and, by implication, opposed to marriage and civil unions for gays and lesbians.

So what does the Bible say about homosexuality? Unfortunately for right-wing Christians, even as the Bible is open-ended about what sort of marriage is desirable (or even whether marriage itself is desirable), it is even more open to the question of same-sex relationships. This is the bottom line: the Bible contains no prohibitions against mutually affirming LGBT relations as practiced today. Scattered comments against same-sex relations in the context of abusive Gentile practices are mentioned in the Bible, but these context-specific and historically bounded statements can hardly be used as justification for prohibiting all loving and committed gay and lesbian relationships today. Although Jesus is very specific about divorce (he categorically forbids it), he says nothing about homosexuality, even while the Bible itself is suffused with beautiful love stories between people of the same sex—Ruth and Naomi, for example, or David and Jonathan—that offer endearing portraits of LGBT-friendly affiliation that have endured for millennia. The Bible comes nowhere near denouncing homosocial relationships; in reality it provides the theological warrants for the very type of trust and mutuality that is at the heart of genuine LGBT relationships today. I suspect biblical traditionalists’ defense of marriage is a pretext for their real focus—slamming same-sex relations and gay marriage—but, paradoxically, this defense runs counter to the actual celebrations of same-sex relations within the sacred texts that they prize as the source of their moral crusades.

Biblical Views on the Sanctity of Life

On the topic of abortion, Graham and his compatriots again say their goal is to “protect the sanctity of life,” arguing that every individual human person has inalienable worth, from the time of their conception until the moment of their last breath. In reality, however, the real concern of faith traditionalists is the legal practice of abortion in America. To “protect the sanctity of life” is code language for banning all types of abortion, even in cases, as the 2012 Republican platform made clear, where incest, rape, or the mother’s life are in question. Adherents of this view describe abortion as central to a “culture of death” that targets the fetus for destruction, supports stem cell research, and encourages assisted end-of-life decisions. They blame Planned Parenthood for spearheading this so-called death culture, a term they use, especially today, to draw connections between abortion and anti-female genocide. As the Family Research Council puts it, “Planned Parenthood has shown support for genocide. . . . [Its] affiliates in Texas, Arizona, New York City, Hawaii, and North Carolina [are] encouraging women to get sex-selection abortions for unborn girls they do not want.” This is a canard. Planned Parenthood does not encourage sex-selective abortions. But Christian conservatives use such charges to impugn the integrity of programs focused on women’s reproductive health choices and to make their point that abortion is the lynchpin of what they regard as America’s homicidal society.

So what does the Bible actually say about abortion? Absolutely nothing. The Bible says a lot about murder, infanticide, infertility, pregnancy, and child-rearing, and while it does contain a few allusions to or statements about miscarriage, it says nothing about the voluntary termination of a pregnancy. On the other hand, the Bible is very clear about

the sanctity of life. Because all of creation is made by God and filled with God's loving and abiding presence, everything that God has made is a bearer of inherent dignity and worth. The overarching framework of the biblical story is the goodness of creation, the inherent value of life, and the joy all beings share in being creatures that are made in God's image. The biblical perspective on the sacred character of life, therefore, is that because all of life is precious, human beings should be caretakers of the great garden of creation and protect this garden from the ravages of violence, pollution, and abuse—what the Bible calls sin.

As Paul says in the Book of Romans, creation itself is like a pregnant mother laboring and groaning to birth her child. Today, how can we help our groaning earth—our mother earth, as the Bible says—realize her mission to birth and care for all beings? The biblical answer is to promote works of love and justice wherever we can in order to nurture and protect life. In contemporary politics, this means Christians should support policies designed to save mother earth's climate system from the ravages of fossil fuel burning that causes global warming, stop the mad rush to war to solve conflicts with international neighbors, push legislation that bans assault weapons and handgun sales in order to break the cycle of violence, promote incarceration reform, outlaw capital punishment, and strengthen the social safety net. The Bible calls Christians to stop the slow death of millions of Americans (including children) from poverty, hunger, homelessness, and lack of access to education and health care. The implementation of all of these life-affirming policies would, in turn, lower the rate of abortions. These five political issues—climate change, war, gun control, detention reform, and the social safety net—are core moral and religious issues that no country with a conscience can ignore and still call itself, in biblical imagery, a light to the nations, one nation under God, a Christian nation. Only one of the two national political parties has taken up these biblical concerns as central to its national identity (and here there is much to be desired). Be this as it may, God is not a Democrat—or a Republican.

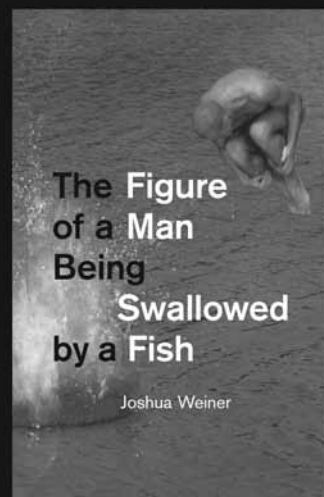
Many religious conservatives, however, have not followed biblical principles in their national agenda. Instead, they argue against climate change legislation, bang the drums of war regarding Iran, say no to sensible gun restrictions, champion a supermax prison system and capital punishment, and try to shred the safety net through privatization and voucher-like social reforms. If "sanctity of life," in the manner of Billy Graham and his lot, applies only to abortion, about which the Bible is silent, and says nothing about environmental destruction, war, violence, poverty, prisoners, and caring for children and the sick—topics about which there are literally thousands of verses in the Bible—then how can religious traditionalists seriously claim to belong to the "biblical issues" party? Ironically, it is the other political party, the secular-immoral-and-against-the-Bible party, as pilloried by its conservative detractors, that is actually doing something akin to God's will in our time by working to save the planet, end violence, and strengthen civil society.

Access to Contraception

The third main concern of the Religious Right has been contraception. Earlier in 2012, President Obama endorsed a provision in the 2010 Affordable Care Act that requires religious hospitals, charities, and schools to offer birth control coverage for their female employees. When the intent of this legislation became clear, religious conservatives objected that the provision undermined religious freedom on the grounds that employees would now be able to use subsidized contraception, even when such use conflicts with church teachings. Obama then mollified some of his critics by stipulating that while employees will retain their right to subsidized birth control coverage, the benefit will be paid for by insurance companies rather than by churches or other religious organizations. Whatever one's stance on this issue, it should be noted that the current administration is not saying that religiously affiliated employers should mandate or even encourage contraception, or that female employees should use contraception. *(continued on page 60)*



Contraception remains a major subject of right-wing Christian concern, even though the Bible itself says nothing on the topic. Here, a participant in a March 2012 Occupy Women's Rights rally in Minneapolis pushes back with some word play.



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