

A Literal Meaning of the Bible Generates Conclusions that Can be Controversial

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Acknowledging the Difficulty

One way or another, we all must wrestle with the implications of taking the meaning of the Bible at face value. Interpreting the author's meaning in a normal plain sense will bring one to conclusions that can be controversial or even adversarial to many. The fact is, the Bible cuts across the grain of much contemporary thinking about morality in our society and within the church. In this environment, one only need to expound the meaning of the text with a clear, concise, normal, plain reading to experience the chagrin of listeners. This can be the result of an unwillingness to understand the Bible with a plain, ordinary, normal, at-face-value perspective. Unfortunately, in many cases, the Bible is used rather than taught. The Bible becomes a victim of the reader's understanding of the meaning rather than a truthful comprehension of the author's understanding of the meaning.

Understanding the Bible in its plain, ordinary sense can be disconcerting. When a particular issue is clearly understood and that understanding is perceived as disagreeable or offensive or harsh or possibly unloving, one is tempted to remake that understanding. Instead of addressing the concern truthfully, as a plain reading of the text would dictate, the temptation is to fudge that understanding so as to diminish any fallout from an application of the biblical author's meaning. The pressures related to putting the biblical author's meaning to use directly and literally are real and personal. They can be very costly to our relationships or reputation. Gross negligence of a plain understanding of Scripture has contributed to a church body that is an inch deep and a mile wide.



The purpose of this paper is to highlight potential controversial positions in practical, moral, and theological areas that one would hold because of a plain ordinary face-value understanding of the biblical author's meaning. There are numerous areas of potential controversy, but in this paper, these areas include a believer marrying an unbeliever, cohabitation, and a literal future for Israel. Since this is a paper on literal interpretation, these subjects will provide a framework for understanding the process of a literal face-value meaning as it applies to genuine issues. Not everything that can be said, will be said, about these topics. What these subjects will do is serve to illustrate how and why one would draw potentially contentious conclusions today, somewhere and at some time, with someone, because of a literal understanding of the biblical text.

A Believer Marrying an Unbeliever

Inevitably, this issue turns up in the context of ministry and the relationships it embodies. Recently, after meeting with a couple who wanted to get married, it became clear that the husband-to-be was not a believer. In our last meeting together, I addressed the issue directly with him. He is a nice guy. She is a nice gal. I enjoyed meeting with them. She obviously was a believer and he was not. There was no doubt that a believer was marrying an unbeliever. So what at-face-value, ordinary, biblical understanding should be taken in this situation? Does the Bible speak plainly about this particular issue? I am going to suggest that a plain, ordinary reading of the Scripture shows that a believer should not marry an unbeliever, and that is why I could not officiate at this wedding.

There are a number of biblical texts that, taken with a literal at-face-value meaning, would plainly conclude that a believer should not marry an unbeliever. First Corinthians 7:39 urges widows to remarry *only in the Lord*. A common, plain understanding of the author's meaning is illustrated by the "Bible Knowledge Commentary." It states that remarriage for a widow was to "another Christian (he must belong to the Lord)—an obligation which though previously unstated, he no doubt meant to apply to all who sought marriage partners" (BKC, Victor Books, 1983, p. 520). According to the commentary, a plain reading of the biblical text understood in a normal way sounds like a believer should not marry an unbeliever.

Ephesians 5:25-28 commands,

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

How can a spouse realistically fulfill this obligation in marriage if he or she is an unbeliever? It is reasonable to conclude that the author's meaning is for believers to marry believers and that their marriage be established in Christ. That is, the wife submits to her husband *as you do to the Lord*, and the husband loves his wife *just as Christ loved the church*. It sure sounds like the pattern for a biblical marriage is a man and woman who are believers, united together in Christ.

Colossians 3:18 says, *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord*. The command for wives to submit to their husbands has its moral limit *as is fitting in the Lord*. A wife's submission to her husband in this regard indicates she is not obligated to follow her husband's leadership if it conflicts with specific scriptural commands (BKC, Victor Books, 1983, p. 683). Governing a wife's submissive response to her husband is in the context of her responsibility to do so as appropriate for those who are in the Lord. It sounds like a wife must express submission in a way that reflects her faith in Christ.

One of the most significant biblical passages referring to marriage between believers and unbelievers is 2 Corinthians 6:14-16a, which says,

Do not [negative command] be [generally timeless fact] unequally yoked [in association] with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? [rhetorical questions requiring "none" for the answers].

This passage begins with a negative command to either stop an action in progress or prohibit a habitual action from taking place. That action is being *unequally yoked with unbelievers*.

Kathy Keller in an internet article, "Don't Take It from Me: Reasons You Should Not Marry an Unbeliever," illustrated how being unequally yoked made it difficult to complete farming tasks:

Most of us no longer live in an agrarian culture, but try to visualize what would happen if a farmer yoked together, say, an ox and a donkey. The heavy wooden yoke, designed to harness the strength of the team, would be askew, as the animals are of different heights, weights, walk at different speeds and with different gaits. The yoke, instead of harnessing the power of the team to complete the task, would rub and chafe BOTH animals, since the load would be distributed

unequally. An unequal marriage is not just unwise for the Christian, it is also unfair to the non-Christian, and will end up being a trial for them both.

It is reasonable to conclude that unequal yoking in a marriage, between a believer and an unbeliever, would increase the anxiety and stress of operating, managing, and directing that marriage together in the same direction and the same path. The basic orientation of each is in conflict with one another.

The reason for this command is based in five rhetorical questions, each building on one another, to emphasize why believers must not be yoked to unbelievers. These contrasts illustrate the incongruity between believers and unbelievers coordinating their lives in the same direction.

- The first, *what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness?* None! There is no collaboration or teamwork between the concept of right living or justice versus lawlessness, the absence of justice.
- The second, *or what fellowship has light with darkness?* None! There is no shared interest or mutual aim between the concept of light so as to see clearly, versus darkness, to not see at all.
- The third, *or what harmony has Christ with Belial?* None! There is no agreement or harmony between Christ and Satan, who is opposed to Christ.
- The fourth, *or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?* None! There is no shared quality or standard between a believer and an unbeliever. Both parties are guided by conflicting priorities and ambitions.
- The fifth, *or what agreement has the temple of God with idols?* None! Since believers are the church today indwelt by the Holy Spirit, anything brought into one's life that defiles it is incompatible with who we are.

In summary, we can conclude that the intention of the author is that being unequally yoked with unbelievers is prohibited for believers. We can infer this to be true because a believer unequally yoked with an unbeliever is not a relationship one can get out of easily or non-sinfully. A coordinated or cooperative mutual response that is consistent with the values and beliefs of a Christ follower is jeopardized. This intention of the author would not necessarily include working for an unbeliever, being coached by one, or being taught in school by one, because one can more easily get out of these relationships and do so non-sinfully. So, if I were to have coffee with the Apostle Paul and ask him if he meant that a believer should not marry an unbeliever, he would agree that I took his meaning in a plain ordinary way.

Cohabitation

Not only is cohabitation on the rise, it is now a permanent fixture in western society. According to a study by Popernoe and Whitehead in 2007, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriages in America*:

No family change has come to the fore in modern times more dramatically, and with such rapidity, as heterosexual cohabitation outside of marriage. Within three decades in most advanced nations the practice of non-marital cohabitation has shifted from being a widely eschewed and even illegal practice to one which, increasingly, is viewed as a normal part of the life course and a necessary prelude to, or even substitute for, marriage. In America before 1970, for example, cohabitation was uncommon, a deviant and unlawful practice found only among people at the margins of our society. Since 1970 the number of Americans living together outside of marriage has increased more than 1,000 percent.

This study and others like it indicate that cohabitation is an acceptable alternative to marriage in the West. Societal values have shifted toward the acceptance of cohabitation as a viable alternative for couples. Cohabitation, rather than dating, has become the testing ground for compatibility today.

Cohabitation has also become an issue for the church. Its acceptance in society has made it a temptation to which many have succumbed. Young Christian couples as well as older Christian couples often choose this alternative to marriage. Against this trend, a plain at-face-value reading of Scripture reveals that cohabitation is unacceptable and sinful. This can make for some difficult relational issues when it has to be addressed among believers. Since cohabitation involves couples who are often sexual partners, we can address this issue from what the Bible says about fornication.

The Greek word translated “sexual immorality” or “fornication” is *porneia* (from which we get the English word *pornography*), and it means literally “unlawful lust” and “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse” according to BAG, a Greek lexicon. In 1 Corinthians 6:13, it says, *yet the body is not for immorality (porneia) but for the Lord and the Lord for the body*. When the body signaled hunger, food was taken to satisfy. When the body craved sexual desire, some concluded that desire needed to be satisfied, too. But since one’s body belongs to the Lord, it’s incompatible to use it immorally. Instead, when faced with the desire to become sexually immoral, one should *flee immorality* (verse 18).

In Galatians 5:19, the Apostle Paul writes, *now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality (porneia), impurity, sensuality*. The deeds of the sinful human nature are as evident as fruit on a tree. Behavior normally demonstrates nature. The Apostle Paul seems to have been saying ironically, look at the accomplishments of the flesh! In this case, it’s immorality or fornication, referring to all types of forbidden sexual relationships. A plain reading of the verse signals that sexual immorality is of the flesh with desires in conflict with the Spirit (verse 17).

Ephesians 5:3 states, *but do not let immorality (porneia) or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints*. The point here is not just to avoid immorality, impurity, and greed but to not live in such a way that anyone would even accuse you of it. Since the only form of lawful sexuality is the marriage between one man and one woman, then anything outside of marriage, including the sexual immorality of fornication, is unlawful, in other words, sin. It certainly sounds like this passage understood in a plain ordinary way would indicate cohabitation is unacceptable.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, it says, *for this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality (porneia)*. In their daily experience, it is God’s will that His people be holy, set apart from sin. This requires a believer to *abstain from sexual immorality*. So setting one’s life apart to God in holiness is exhibited by avoiding fornication. This is the expressed *will of God* for His followers. An ordinary normal understanding of the passage clearly indicates that cohabiting partners is not the will of God and thus, is sinful.

Hebrews 13:4 describes the honorable state of marriage. *Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators (porneia) and adulterers God will judge*. This verse draws a clear distinction between that which is pure and honorable—marriage—and that which is sexually immoral—anything outside of marriage. The marriage bed is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. So, the marriage bed is morally pure when practiced between marriage partners. Otherwise, fornication, sexual intercourse before marriage, or adultery, sexual intercourse with someone other than your marriage partner, God will judge. A plain reading of Scripture indicates that living together outside of marriage falls into this category and is definitely sinful.

In summary, a plain at-face-value understanding of the Bible indicates that sexual immorality or fornication is a deviation from God’s standard. Cohabitation is usually understood as living together as sexual partners. So cohabitation would be a deviation from God’s standard. Instead, believers should

flee immorality, not indulge in it as cohabiting sexual partners. Marriage is the proper relationship for a man and woman to share the marriage bed. It is in marriage that sexual relations are undefiled and morally pure. Fornicators indulging in non-marital sexual relations can expect to face God's judgment.

A Literal Future for Israel

In *Replacement/Covenant Theology*, the church is said to supersede Israel in such a way that Israel is abandoned, with no redemptive future. The promises God made to Israel in the Scriptures find their fulfillment in the church. All of the *biblical* covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and King David are really aspects of the overarching *Covenant of Grace* that God enacted after the fall of mankind. The promises to Israel, being temporal, earthly, material, and literal are selectively spiritually allegorized to fit the church today. The *New Covenant* given to Israel in Jeremiah 31 was therefore fulfilled through the church. Since the Jews are no longer God's chosen people, God does not have any future plans for the nation of Israel.

Separation/Dispensational Theology makes a distinction between Israel and the church. This system is based upon a plain, ordinary understanding of biblical passages related to a future Israel to make this case. It is reasonable to conclude from a plain reading of Scripture that God has a future literal plan for Israel to possess and live in her land. The biblical covenants relate to this literal promise to Israel. The Old Testament prophets declared this literal future for God's chosen people, Israel, throughout their prophecies. To illustrate this, let's survey prophecies from the 'Big Three': Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

As a casual reading of the book of Isaiah demonstrates, the prophet Isaiah speaks repeatedly on the subject of a future earthly kingdom. In his book, he predicts a future kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital and involving the tribe of Judah:

In the last days, the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths. For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples, and they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war (Isaiah 2:2-4).

This prophecy has had no literal fulfillment in the past, but a future kingdom on earth could fulfill precisely these predictions of Isaiah. It does sound like there is a future for Israel that the church has not replaced.

One of the better known of Isaiah's pronouncements concerning the future kingdom is his prediction of Christ's birth:

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Again, this passage refers to an earthly government. The child will be born on earth; the throne will be that of David; rule will be characterized by justice and righteousness; and it will be accomplished by the power of God rather than the power of men. His birth has been fulfilled, but the establishment of His earthly government has not. It sounds reasonable to conclude the church has not replaced Israel.

Isaiah 49 has several important features about restoring Israel in the future in their land. God lays out promises of future restoration to the faithful remnant who are fearful that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten them. God declares,

can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me (Isaiah 49:15-16).

Isaiah continues to articulate a future for Jerusalem and her people, saying,

I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; and there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying (Isaiah 65:17-23).

This sounds like God has a future plan for His city, Jerusalem, where fear and death will no longer be experienced. This does not sound like the church is replacing Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah declared a literal future for the united nation of Israel. The nation of Judah was about to be overrun by Babylon, due to their unfaithfulness to the Lord. God invited them to repent, once again promising that a future repentant nation will turn to God.

At that time, they shall call Jerusalem 'The Throne of the Lord,' and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord; nor shall they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart. In those days the house of Judah will walk with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance (Jeremiah 3:17-18).

This sounds like God is going to regather all of His people, both Israel and Judah, in some future time to the land He originally promised to Abraham. It does not sound like a replacement of Israel with the church.

God declared that days are coming in the future when He will bring up

the sons of Israel from the land of the north and from all the countries where he has banished them. For I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers (Jeremiah 16:15).

God also declared that

days are coming...when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, 'The Lord our righteousness' (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

This sounds like God will regather His people to the land of Israel where they will live and Christ will reign. It does not sound like the church is replacing Israel.

The prophet Ezekiel recorded the following prophecies about a literal future for Israel throughout his book in the run-up to chapters 40–48, which articulate the specifics of the Millennial Kingdom and reign of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem on earth (Ezekiel 11:17-20; 16:60-63; 17:22-24; 20:33-44; 28:25-26; 34:11-31; 36:8-15, 22-38; 37:11-14, 21-28; 39:25-29). Ezekiel prophesied of a literal future for Israel, stating, *then they will know that I am the Lord their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer...for I shall have poured out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Lord God (Ezekiel 39:28-29).*

This sounds like God is going to regather His people in the future back into their land He promised to them. This does not sound like a replacement of Israel by the church.

And it's not just Old Testament passages that make this case. In Romans chapters nine through eleven, Paul spoke of a literal Israel and God's dealing with her in the past, present, and future. In this section, he noted the fact that God will save the entire literal nation in the future.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Romans 11:25-27).

This sounds like there is a future for the nation of Israel who will be established in their land by a deliverer who will come from Zion. God clearly promised a future restoration of a remnant from all the tribes of Israel.

A plain reading of Scripture taken at-face-value leads to the conclusion that the meaning of the biblical authors is a literal future for Israel.

Conclusion

The premise of this paper was that the author's intended meaning is ascertained by a plain ordinary at-face-value reading of the biblical text. That process may lead to conclusions that can be controversial, due to notions that are disagreeable to a plain ordinary understanding of the author's meaning. Those disagreements can be practical, moral, or theological in nature. Three subjects reviewed where potential disagreement could occur were a believer marrying an unbeliever, cohabitation, and a literal future for Israel. Sometimes these subjects understood in a literal, plain, ordinary way can be personally costly or controversial. This should not be a deterrent to articulating that clear, plain meaning whenever the Bible is being taught, studied, or addressed.