

Same Sex Marriage and the NSW/ACT Baptist Association

October 2023

Summary

In May 2023 the Assembly of the NSW and ACT Baptist Association decided to disaffiliate churches and disaccredit ministers who do not support the view that 'Marriage is a covenant relationship ordained by God as a lifelong faithful union of one man and one woman.'

We believe that the Good News of Jesus is for all people without qualification, and we are deeply committed to creating a community of genuine welcome. We have been part of the Association since our inception in 1929 and remain committed to association with other Baptist Churches. We do not want to be disaffiliated.

There are genuine disagreements about same-sex marriage across the Association, and we are sorrowful that the Association has decided to split on this issue. Doing so is unwise because:

1. To require uniformity on issues such as marriage is contrary to Baptist tradition.
2. The Association's position fails to acknowledge the breadth of Biblical texts and practices relating to marriage.
3. The Association's position fails to acknowledge different ways to interpret the Bible for today's Australia.
4. The Association formulated its position without discussing relevant biblical texts and how to interpret them.
5. The Association's statement on marriage is inadequate in extending care, compassion, and love to people in our congregations and communities.
6. The Association's statement on marriage weakens our movement and will stunt the mission of the church.

This paper sets out our views—reached after much study, prayer and discussion—more fully.¹ We do not insist that everyone share our view on same-sex marriage. Rather, we seek acknowledgement that people of faith can reach different conclusions after prayerfully studying the scriptures, and that this should not hinder our fellowship with one another.

¹ This paper follows *Our submission to a NSW and ACT Baptist Association Taskforce on Baptist values and same sex marriage* (2020):
<https://www.canbap.org/2020/02/our-submission-to-a-nsw-and-act-baptist-association-taskforce-on-baptist-values-and-same-sex-marriage/>

Same-sex Marriage and the NSW and ACT Baptist Association

In May 2023 the Assembly of the NSW and ACT Baptist Association amended the Association's constitution to include the following position statement:

Marriage is a covenant relationship ordained by God as a lifelong faithful union of one man and one woman. Sexual intimacy outside such a marriage relationship is incompatible with God's intention for us as His people.

At the same meeting, the Assembly asked Assembly Council to bring to the May 2024 Annual Assembly, 'a relational process for engaging with and where necessary, facilitating the withdrawal of already affiliated churches and removal of accredited pastors who do not support the Association's position on marriage.'

It is now highly likely that churches will be disaffiliated, and pastors stripped of their accreditation if they do not agree with the Association's position.

This paper from Canberra Baptist Church has three purposes:

1. to affirm our ongoing commitment to the Association, despite recent events, and in the context of the real prospect of Canberra Baptist being disaffiliated;
2. to explain why our delegates voted against that motion and subsequent related motions;
3. to provide some resources so others may consider these issues, in the absence of any being provided by the Association.

Since our inception in 1929, Canberra Baptist Church has been a member of the Association of Baptist Churches of NSW (and the ACT), and alongside these churches, shared the commitment to advancing the Good News in our context.

Canberra Baptist Church affirms the biblical confession that 'Jesus is Lord' and holds strongly to the Baptist ideals of the authority of Scripture as it points us to Jesus, the call of discipleship celebrated in baptism, the autonomy of the local church and freedom of conscience for individual believers.

We have discussed the issues related to the Association's position on marriage over several church meetings, including the voting intentions of our delegates and the content of this paper, which gained overwhelming support from the congregation. We recognise that some in our community may not agree with everything outlined here and we celebrate the freedom of conscience of believers to hold divergent views whilst remaining committed to maintaining Christian unity.

Canberra Baptist Church's commitment to Baptist Association

Canberra Baptist Church remains committed to the NSW/ACT Association and strongly desires to continue being affiliated with other churches that share Baptist values. We do so for the following reasons:

We are committed to bearing witness to the Good News of Jesus.

We believe the Good News of Jesus is for all people, without qualification.

We believe that Jesus Christ reveals the very nature of God, and we see in the life of Jesus how God lives with open and welcoming arms, rather than with violence and control. In particular, we pay attention to God's heart, as made manifest in Jesus, for those who are marginalised and left vulnerable by the religious and cultural structures of their time and place.

We believe in the power of God's Spirit who consoles, inspires, and challenges us.

We believe that through the cross and resurrection, God reconciles a broken world with God's self. As followers of Jesus, we believe we are all invited to join in God's redemptive work and God's mission in the world. As a community, we are committed to loving our neighbours and sharing God's love and justice in words and actions.

We believe the Good News of Jesus is only good news insofar as it points to the great mercy and love of a God who welcomes all.

We are committed to being Baptist.

We seek to follow Jesus Christ, as God manifest in humanity and as revealed in Scripture, who we understand to be our authority for life. We nourish our faith through studying the Scriptures, prayer, and regularly coming together for worship and the Lord's Supper. As a community, we celebrate the freedom of conscience of believers, and we continually seek to discern together the Holy Spirit's will in our time and place.

As Baptists, we remain fiercely committed to the autonomy of the local church. Our Baptist heritage compels us to reject the authority of any central organisation or person that purports to speak for every church or member in matters of faith and conscience.

We are committed to affiliation with other Baptists, even in spaces of disagreement.

Canberra Baptist Church was, quite literally, built by the Australian Baptist movement. In turn, from our beginnings Canberra Baptist has been firmly committed to the Baptist movement in the ACT, in NSW/ACT and across Australia and to the global Baptist movement. Church members and staff have served on local, national, and global advisory boards, have been sent as cross-cultural workers, have raised money for the work of Australian Baptists in mission, faithfully supported BaptistCare and Baptist World Aid and have advocated alongside Baptist churches for causes of justice and peace. We remain committed, collectively, and individually, to continuing to participate in and serve this movement.

When we join with other churches in affiliation, we do not surrender our autonomy, but we help each other in fulfilling the mission of Jesus and contribute to the work we cannot do on our own, including offering theological education, partnering together in global mission, running aid organisations and sharing resources and expertise to create Safe Churches.

We recognise there is, at the present time, genuine and deep disagreement on the question of marriage in our association. We also recognise that our unity as an association is based on our call to be disciples of Jesus Christ. This shared commitment to living out and proclaiming the good news of Jesus in word and deed rises above our different perspectives on marriage.

When we have disagreement, we believe that wrestling with issues together, through prayer and reading the scriptures, strengthens and sustains us.

We are committed to future generations of Australian Baptists.

At Canberra Baptist Church, we are committed to bearing witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ; to living out this commitment in distinctively Baptist ways and to sharing our faith with others in affiliation. Each generation of Baptists across our Association has, and will continue, to wrestle with contemporary social issues. We do not want to see our Association fracture because of different views on contemporary social issues that present moral and theological challenges.

Canberra Baptist values communion with a diverse assembly of churches. As we seek to discern the movement of the Spirit in our time and place, we value the perspective, encouragement, and challenge that comes from others across our movement. We may not agree with the positions of all, but we are convinced of the need to continue to listen to each other.

We remain committed to stewarding for future generations an Association able to hold unity in disagreement and to continue to be a catalyst across NSW and the ACT for sharing the Good News of Jesus in distinctively Baptist ways.

Canberra Baptist's opposition to the adoption of Association positions

There is nothing wrong with doctrinal statements as summaries of what many Christians believe. The problem is that they are creatures of their time and can be used inappropriately. Many Baptist churches refuse to ascribe to creeds and doctrines, and always have.

Until recently, the NSW/ACT Association has not required already affiliated churches to support a fixed position on a societal issue. The requirement to do so contradicts our values of freedom of conscience and the autonomy of the local congregation to discern together the will of God in their time and place. Accordingly, this requirement is contrary to our Baptist values.

In line with our commitment to being Baptist, Canberra Baptist Church opposes the adoption of binding Association position statements. Regardless of our views on the contents of the proposed positions, we remain concerned that the adoption of positions limits local church autonomy and constrains the freedom of conscience of individuals and individual churches.

Canberra Baptist's opposition to the Association's position on marriage

In addition to opposing the adoption of binding position statements in principle, Canberra Baptist Church believes that the Association's position on marriage statement is deeply flawed.

Our critique centres on five broad points:

- 1. Biblical foundations: the statement does not adequately consider the range of biblical material on marriage;**
- 2. Christian interpretation of biblical texts: the statement fails to apply an adequate method to reading texts written in a particular ancient context to Australia in 2023;**
- 3. Process integrity: the statement was adopted by the Association with no discussion of biblical texts and interpretation principles;**
- 4. Pastoral care: the statement is inadequate in extending care, compassion, and love to people in our congregations and communities;**
- 5. Missional calling: the statement weakens our movement and will stunt the mission of the church.**

The main motive for introducing the position statement was opposition to same-sex marriage. We will therefore also discuss below our thinking on the biblical view of same-sex relationships as it applies to Australia in the early twenty-first century.

1. Biblical foundations

The writers of the Bible lived in societies with forms of marriage which differed strikingly from one another and from contemporary forms.

Most obviously, the Old Testament was written in a society where polygamy was both legal and widely practiced. The Old Testament endorses polygamy. Many characters in the Old Testament had multiple wives, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samuel, and David, and this is never condemned. Old Testament laws not only assume polygamy but directly cause it to occur and regulate its application (e.g. Exodus 21:7-11, Deuteronomy 21:15-17, Deuteronomy 25:5, Leviticus 18:18).

By contrast, the New Testament was written in a society where monogamy was enforced by Roman law. The New Testament writers embrace monogamy.

This on its own indicates that it is not possible to develop a 'biblical view' of marriage by reading the texts as straightforward sets of instructions for contemporary practice. A further conclusion is that the 'biblical view of marriage' is sufficiently broad to accommodate a wide range of practices. There is no reason to believe that this range of possibilities is exhausted by practices in the world of the Old Testament and the Roman Empire in the first century.

Another contrast to modern forms of marriage is that marriage in the ancient world was the transfer of the ownership of a woman from her father to her husband, complete with laws stipulating the price paid for the exchange. This is not a complete definition of the form or function of biblical marriage, which may in some cases have also included romance, but it is part of its fundamental basis which should not be ignored.

Here are some Old Testament texts which illustrate the position of women and role of marriage:

- “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house, you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, male or female slaves, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” *Exodus 20:17*
- In a list of laws relating to property disputes for oxen, donkeys, and sheep is this law: “When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins.” *Exodus 22:16-17*
- “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged and seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her, he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.” *Deuteronomy 22:28-29*

The New Testament also reflects the subordinate social and economic status of women. For example:

- “...Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman.... For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God, but woman is the reflection of man.” *1 Corinthians 11:3,7*
- “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” *1 Timothy 2:12-14*
- The various ‘household codes’ such as Ephesians 5:21-33 which say, “Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church.”

We note, however, that within the social structures of the time, the New Testament affords much greater value, dignity, respect, and protection to women (see for example Luke 8 and Mark 10).

Discussions on biblical marriage often draw on Genesis 2:21-24 and on Jesus’ use of these passages in the gospels when talking about divorce (Matthew 19:3-10, Mark 10:2-9):

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

‘This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

These passages certainly indicate an expectation that marriages should involve a long-term faithful commitment from the marriage partners. In the biblical context, however, these passages affirm marriage fidelity within both polygamy and the male ownership of women.

The texts do not provide support for modern egalitarian monogamous marriage arrangements.

The Association's position on marriage is stated to be based on biblical principles but fails to engage with the cultural complexities of ancient Israel.

2. *Christian interpretation of biblical texts*

Given the range of marriage practices endorsed in the Bible, how can we understand what the biblical texts imply for marriage in Australia today?

The contemporary implications of the biblical texts can only be understood by applying consistent principles. It is not clear what principles were applied in developing the Association's position on marriage, because they were never discussed. There are dangers in treating the Bible as a simple set of instructions written with contemporary circumstances in mind. Such an approach has led to terrible abuses in the past (*see the Appendix for examples*).

The biblical texts are in constant dialogue – and sometimes argument – with each other. Insisting that there is a simple view, or that there should be a one-dimensional reading of the text, fails to do justice to the biblical texts and sees the Bible as dead and static, not living and active.

The Bible is unique in its honesty and truthfulness, where the voices of both the powerful and the weak are heard, as John J Collins explains²:

No other collection of documents from the ancient world, and scarcely any other documents at all, speak with such passionate urgency on the subject of social justice. The primary voices in this respect are those of the Hebrew prophets, but the law codes of the Pentateuch are also important. Biblical laws and attitudes ... are all mired in the cultural assumptions of the ancient world, with only occasional flickers of enlightenment. Nonetheless, the concern for the unfortunate of society in these books is remarkable, and often stands as a reproach to the modern Western world.

We read the Bible principally through the story of Jesus as the revelation of who God is and what God does. In his teaching and actions, we see Jesus upsetting and undermining old understandings and inviting others into a new way of seeing things. In approaching societal issues such as marriage (and slavery, and the status of women and so on) we also find it helpful to understand the biblical text as wrestling with the question: what does it mean to live as the people of God in the society we are a part of?

In considering marriage this approach leads us to understand the 'household codes' demanding that wives be subject to their husbands, as advice to Christians on how to live out the Gospel within the then-prevailing social structures, not as an endorsement of those structures. The principle that believers "[be] subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21) finds a very different expression in a society where marriage is an egalitarian institution.

A striking difference between the New Testament milieu and Australia today is that same-sex marriage is legally recognised. Furthermore, it is understood that sexual identity is not a choice but a natural disposition. Our task is therefore to study the Bible and understand how what it says about marriage applies in this new context. One conclusion is that same-

² [John J Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* \(3rd edition\), p. 390.](#)

sex marriages should display the same love, faithfulness, life-long commitment and concern for the other that the Bible demands of all marriages.

The claim that the Bible condemns all sex acts between people of the same sex has been a long-standing mainstream Christian interpretation of the scriptures which must not be lightly overturned. Nevertheless, we believe that it is flawed reading and note that there is a large body of scholarship—including from evangelical scholars—supporting a different view.

This short paper is not the place for detailed analysis of these issues, which are discussed at depth elsewhere.³ However, we will make some important summary points.

- The Bible has been interpreted for many centuries through a lens of prejudice against homosexuality, including a now-discredited assumption that homosexual sex is ‘against nature’.
- Claims that the New Testament forbids sex between people of the same sex are based on a small number of texts whose meaning is unclear. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, men who engage in illicit sex... none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” The New Revised Standard Version (updated version, cited above) notes that the meanings of the Greek words translated ‘male prostitutes’ and ‘men who engage in illicit sex’ are uncertain. Other versions, such as the NIV, use translations such as ‘men who have sex with men’ which reflect traditional prejudices and have no doubt made this debate more difficult. In fact, we do not know with any certainty what sexual practices are referred to here.
- It is a commonplace of the debate on same-sex marriage to claim that Genesis 2:21-24 and Jesus’ commentary on it in the gospels prescribes heterosexuality as a moral norm. However, there is no reason to suppose that Genesis is doing anything more than speaking to a culture in which heterosexual marriage was the only model available. We find nothing in this passage to suggest that heterosexual marriage is normative for all times and all societies, or that the writer was even addressing that question. Similarly, Jesus, in his commentary (Matthew 19:3-10, Mark 10:2-9), was talking about divorce in a society where all marriages were heterosexual. His words cannot be taken as a statement on same-sex marriage.

In reading the scriptures, we do not find a clear and universally binding prohibition of committed, faithful same-sex relations.

Jesus, through his words and actions, repeatedly teaches that acceptance by God is not about the law, nature, morality or reason. It is about the heart of the person, exemplified in faith and their conduct – the conduct coming from the heart, rather than from the laws. But neither are the laws invalidated. People in a long-term, considered, consensual, loving, and

³ James V Brownson, *Gender, Bible and Sexuality: reframing the church's debate on same-sex relationships*, 2013; Keith Dyer, ‘A consistent Biblical approach to ‘(homo)sexuality’ in Brian Edgar & Gordon Preece (eds), *Whose Homosexuality? Which authority?: Homosexual Practice, Marriage and Ordination in the Church*, 2009; Joel Hollier, *A Place at His Table*, 2019; Preston Sprinkle (ed), *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*, 2016; Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 2015.

exclusive sexual commitment to another person of the same sex can live in alignment with Jesus' teaching.

3. Process integrity

Through several years of debate in our Association on this issue, resulting in the Association's position on marriage being written into the constitution, there has been no biblical discussion at all. There has been no effort made to wrestle, as an Association and across our many differences, with how we are to understand the biblical texts in light of our current challenges.

In their *Reflections and Recommendations from Assembly Council to the May 2023 Annual Assembly*, Assembly Council stated:

The processes so far, as imperfect as they may have been, have been unmistakably Baptist. We have prayed, appointed task forces, conducted forums, taken surveys, engaged listening processes, and discussed and decided matters at our Assemblies. This is what Baptists do when confronted with challenging issues in their collective life.

Reading the Bible together is conspicuously (but accurately) absent in the above list, yet this is just as 'Baptist' as taking a survey or appointing a task force. Without considering the Bible, and wrestling with the texts together, the process has been un-Baptist.

We reject the notion that a majority vote, regardless of its margin, renders biblical study of an issue unnecessary. Biblical interpretation should not be done by voting. Good people of deep faith on all sides of an issue can read the text and come to different interpretations. There has been no space to listen to these possibilities.

As stated in the first two points above, we consider that there is a genuine discussion on marriage to be had with close reference to scripture. A properly Baptist interchange, like the excellent Anglican set of essays published in 2019, would have promoted mutual understanding and respect.⁴ The biblical reflections briefly outlined in this document try to provide at least one side of that discussion. In the absence of this discussion, however, decisions made by the Assembly, no matter what the margin of a vote, lack scriptural validity.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the biblical texts with other Baptists.

4. Pastoral care

Through the gospels, we consistently see that Jesus approach to individuals is not through a framework of applying rules, laws and texts, but through fully seeing and engaging the person he encounters. As Christians we are called to mirror the practice of Jesus: not seeing individuals in our community through the lens of rules or laws, but always seeing the individual and extending compassion and welcome.

The Association's position on marriage sends a clear message to LGBTIQ+ individuals that their full participation in the life of our Baptist movement is not welcome. For young people in our communities, including those who are wrestling with questions of sexuality and identity, this position sends a clear sign that there is no space to explore these questions in

⁴ Published by the Anglican Church of Australia and available at: <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Marriage-Doctrine-Essays-Final.pdf>

the context of Christian fellowship and community. We are deeply aware of the hurt and pain caused by well-intentioned religious communities to LGBTIQ+ people and are committed to creating a community of genuine welcome.

The single-minded focus on marriage is also a poor pastoral response to individuals in our communities who are not married. The hyper-sensitivity to the one issue of marriage, to the extent that an entirely new constitutional category of 'Position Statement' was created, has rendered others in our movement as unimportant or, at best, second-class. Singleness is implied to be an inferior state to marriage. This statement offers a poor invitation to a life of discipleship to those in our communities who are not, or who may never marry. The one we seek to follow never married, and marriage was never implied to be essential to being a follower of Jesus.

5. Missional calling

Simply through its obsession with a single issue, the Association has distanced itself from the very people it is trying to reach for its future. By reinforcing a well-earned reputation of being open to newcomers only on its own terms, the church cannot hope to be a light to the world.

Canberra Baptist values communion with the more theologically conservative members of our church family and appreciates the delicate balance within our Association. We listen carefully to words of caution regarding moving too quickly with social trends. Similarly, we are proud to play the role of encouraging the Association to consider how to best remain relevant as society inevitably changes. We may not agree with other people's positions, but we must continue to listen to each other. Our Association is stronger when churches and ministers can sit together in a state of creative discomfort, rather than fracture into multiple special interest groups.

We are concerned that expelling those with a more progressive and more pastoral stance on inclusion will set in motion a significant shift within our Association, diminishing new church planting efforts, reconciliation work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, our strong voice in the past against domestic violence, our advocacy for the poor and marginalised, and the ongoing roles of women in ministry where the gains of recent decades may be formally unwound. The continued presence of progressive and moderate churches will ensure that the breadth of Christian expression in our Association is maintained.

Communities across NSW and the ACT are diverse. In our work to advance the Good News, we need communities of faith that are as diverse as the communities in which they are located. An Association that can live in the creative tension of disagreement, wrestling together with scripture, will continue to be an Association that is alive to the diverse and divergent ways God is at work in our communities.

Appendix: Three historical examples of misusing scripture on societal issues

Throughout history interpretations of the bible have often been used by powerful people – often within the church – to justify awful acts and atrocities. We need only think of the Reformers’ persecution of our spiritual forebears (the so-called Anabaptists) in 16th century central Europe.⁵

Martin Luther, arguably the greatest of the Reformers said this about the Jews in *On the Jews and Their Lies*:

There is no other explanation for this [the Jews failure to accept Christ] than the one cited earlier from Moses - namely, that God has struck them with ‘madness and blindness and confusion of mind’ (Deuteronomy 28:28). So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians which they shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the blood of the children they have shed since then (which still shines forth from their eyes and their skin). We are at fault in not slaying them.

Luther’s interpretation clearly draws on the description of Jesus’ trial in Matthew 27:25, “Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” Luther read his Bible correctly. The problem here is not Luther’s exegesis but in how he used the texts. He was wrong to conclude that Jews should be persecuted in his time or any other.

Richard Furman (1755-1825), president of the first American Baptist association, was an opponent of slavery in his youth, but he later changed his position to the extent that in 1822 he wrote *An Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Colored Population of the United States*, in which he states:

The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were directed to purchase their bond-men and bond-maids of the Heathen nations; except they were of the Canaanites, for these were to be destroyed. And it is declared, that the persons purchased were to be “their bond-men forever;” and an “inheritance for them and their children.” They were nor to go out free in the year of jubilee, as the Hebrews, who had been purchased, were; the line being clearly drawn between them.

In the New Testament, the Gospel History, or representation of facts, presents us with a view correspondent with that, which is furnished by other authentic ancient histories of the state of the world at the commencement of Christianity. The “servants under the yoke” (bond-servants or slaves) mentioned by Paul to Timothy, as having “believing masters,” are not authorized by him to demand of them emancipation, or to employ violent means to obtain it; but are directed to “account their masters worthy of all honour,” and “not to despise them, because they were brethren” in religion; “but the rather to do them service, because they were faithful and beloved partakers of the Christian benefit.”

Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles who feared not the faces of men and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian

⁵ Thorwald Lorenzen, ‘*Ecumenism starts at the “point of pain”*. *Luther and the victims of the Reformation*’ (*St Mark’s Review*, No. 241, October 2017 (3), 30-49).

Church ... But, instead of this, they let the relationship remain untouched, as being lawful and right, and insist on the relative duties.

Furman, with full knowledge of the Scriptures, and together with other Baptists, sincerely accepted that owning slaves was entirely biblical and Christian. The origin of his conclusion was not incorrect exegesis – Furman’s accurately read his Bible – but was deeply flawed in his interpretation of this for his own situation.

A third example is the strong Christian opposition to women’s suffrage in the late 19th and early 20th century, with most appealing to biblical texts.

The one and only hope, Christian womanhood and Christian manhood returning with the penitent tears to the reviled word of God ... That new citizenship will remember feminism as one of the darkest blots on the pages of human history ... If any one wishes to reply to these lines they are welcome. But they must not forget the implacable logic of Christian truth and history. With others it seems useless even to discuss. If we wish the revolution, grim and bloody, let us rush on with the mad woman of the age. If not let us pause and take into our counsels the men and women who have retained some reverence for the eternal God and His Word.⁶

And,

Man is the recognized guardian of things and the natural protector of life, liberty, and property. Women from their very nature are intended to be protected ... Man to blaze the way and direct the sterner things of life, of a political and military nature, and woman to mould the social, moral, and educational conduct of the home, administer the agencies of mercy, such as the Red Cross, and remain “as the weaker vessel” unto the stronger as spoken of in the first Epistle General of Saint Paul (3-7). In First Corinthians (11:1-10) the Great Apostle Paul says: “But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ: and the head of every woman is man...” In his First Epistle to Timothy (2:11-12), when speaking of the application of laws, he says: “let women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over man, but to be in silence” ... Here is a direct admonition commanding women not to usurp authority over man in the application of laws.⁷

And,

To deny or ignore this [natural] law is to deny the plainest facts, and to fly in the face of nature itself. Nature and reason, no less than Scripture, declares man to be the “head of the woman” and of the family, and for the same reason he is the proper head and ruler of the State ... This whole movement for female suffrage, is, at least in its motive and beginning, a rebellion against the divinely ordained position and duties of woman, and an ambition for independence and the honors of a more public life ... St. Paul, in his chapter on the subordination of woman,—upon which so much shallow sophistry and irreverent wit has been expended,—appeals in his

⁶ Rev. Adolf Hult from ‘*Nebraska Clergymen Condemn Woman Suffrage*,’ 1913

⁷ Waitman Harrison Conaway, *The Subjugation of Man through Woman Suffrage*, 1919

argument chiefly to nature and the original constitution of woman, which no social facts or customs can essentially change.⁸

We need to humbly accept that Christians of great faith, great learning, great conviction, and noble intentions have come to monstrous conclusions from the biblical texts and have tragically been prepared to act on them. These (mostly) men fervently understood the scripture to encourage persecution of the Jews, the promotion of slavery and the denial of women's suffrage. They were correct: there are biblical texts that endorse all these views. The question is not what the Bible says, but when to apply those texts and when to not.

⁸ Rev. Prof. H. M. Goodwin, *Women's Suffrage*, *New Englander and Yale review*, Volume 43, Issue 179 (March 1884)