

## Note to Margaret Court: the Bible isn't meant to be read that literally

Written by Robyn J. Whitaker, Bromby Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Trinity College; Lecturer, University of Divinity

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Margaret Court's views on homosexuality do not reflect those of most Christians. The Conversation/Shutterstock

Margaret Court is wrong to claim marriage is “a union between a man and a woman as stated in the Bible”, as she did in her [open letter to Qantas](#) , or that a “biblical view” of marriage is between one man and one woman, as she did [on Channel Ten's The Project last week](#)

. She is even more wrong to suggest she is being persecuted for her views. Here is why.

Reading the Bible to determine the shape of contemporary marriage is not an easy task. It is an ancient collection of 66 books, written in three different languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic), and spanning over 1,000 years of human history. Much of the Bible was written 2,500 years ago, when family life was very different.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Abraham fathered children with his concubine as well as his wife, and Moses likely had two wives (one of whom is presented as problematic because she was a foreigner). Famous biblical kings, like David and Solomon, had entire palaces full of often dubiously acquired wives and concubines that served as symbols of their power and status.

The reality is families in the Bible reflect the patriarchal structures of their period. Women were considered commodities to be married off for political alliances, economic reasons, or to keep families connected. They had no autonomy to choose their partners.

Polygamy was common, as was the use of slaves as sexual concubines. I don't hear anyone advocating a “biblical view” of marriage suggesting we return to those particular scenarios.

In the New Testament, Jesus said nothing about homosexual relationships or marriage, except that people should not divorce. This teaching is widely ignored by many Christian denominations today. Most likely, Jesus' concern in speaking against divorce was for the vulnerable place in which it left women, given they could not usually earn their own money or inherit.

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Marriage was allowed in the New Testament, but the most prolific writer, Paul, thinks celibacy is preferable for a Christian. When Paul writes “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), he presents an ideology profoundly disruptive of patriarchal family structures, gender roles and hierarchy.

This kind of Christian teaching led, if anything, to a breakdown of traditional marriage structures (in ancient terms). For example, the option to remain celibate and live in community (such as a nunnery or monastery) was a radical, attractive and liberating alternative to arranged marriage for women in earliest Christianity. Jesus’ own mother, who is an example of faith in the church’s tradition, appears to have left her husband and other children at home to follow her itinerant son.

Not all opinions are of equal weight. While Margaret Court remains one of the most phenomenal sportswomen in Australian history, this does not qualify her as a spokesperson for Christianity on marriage equality. Nor does being a self-appointed leader of a [church she created](#) .

Indeed, if Court applied the literalism with which she reads Genesis to the whole of the Bible, she’d find herself in hot water, since 1 Timothy 2:12 explicitly forbids women teaching or having any authority over men. This kind of culturally bound ideology is precisely why biblical scholars and mainstream Christian churches do not adhere to a literal interpretation of this ancient and diverse text.

To criticise and expect a higher level of discourse from a public figure is not bullying nor persecution. Court willingly put herself into the public space by writing an open letter to Qantas. She could have lodged her complaint privately with the company if she wished to remain free of public comment.

There is nothing inherently Christian about the so-called traditional arrangement of the nuclear family. You can find that model in the Bible if you look for it, but it is not the dominant view. Nor does the Bible condemn what we understand to be loving, mutual LGBTQI relationships today.

There is nothing like the contemporary concept of sexual orientation in the biblical text. Where the Bible does appear to condemn homosexual acts it condemns same-sex acts that are rape,

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adulterous or represent imbalanced power dynamics, such as an elite male with a youth. Interestingly, these same power dynamics are not critiqued when an elite male takes a young woman as a sexual concubine; a sobering reminder of the patriarchal worldview that lies behind the text and ancient fears about penetration and masculinity.

Concepts of family and marriage have evolved and changed throughout human history, including within the church. Modern Christian families can be made up of gay couples, straight couples, single people in community, childless adults, foster parents, step-parents, grandparents and biological parents. It is their faith that makes them Christian, not their family structure nor sexuality.

Many Christians are not represented by the views we've recently heard from Margaret Court, nor those espoused by the so-called Australian Christian Lobby. In fact, quite the opposite. Christian values of love, justice and inclusion found throughout the Bible are why so many Christians support marriage equality.

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