

Address to NSW/ACT Baptist State Assembly

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Abstract

This is a short address I presented at the NSW/ACT Baptist State Assembly on 13 Sept 2014, in support of a motion put forward by Surry Hills Baptist Church. We had moved that the churches, College and Council should put down on paper their understanding of same-sex oriented people, considered especially in pastoral and missional terms. I had about 10 minutes to speak; the following text is an expansion of my bullet points. A motion was passed, more-or-less unanimously, which requested the state Executive to consider and report on the issues raised at the next Assembly in March 2015.

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Motion

- (1) That member churches, the Association and the College should this year prepare and present a clear pastoral and missional understanding of the 1–2% of Australians who are same sex oriented.
- (2) That *inter alia*, this should consider the present barriers to discussing these issues in Baptist circles, the probable passage of Marriage Equality legislation in Australia within the next two years, and the question of an apology to same-sex oriented people for harmful actions in our past.

Introduction

Good morning, and thank you for your time today. I consider it an honour to address this group, as there are some a couple of people here that I regard as highly as anyone in the world.

I am not a pastor, though I do currently have responsibility for a small inner-city church. I work in IT. I moved into the inner-city seven years ago to address a few issues that I didn't see my suburban church addressing: atheism, homelessness, the gay community, and others. I thought then as I do now that these are some of the key questions we face in western society.

I probably should start by acknowledging that there's *just a little* anxiety in the room right now. Is anyone else feeling that? I remember when I was at the College, I once had to review a book on pastoral ministry which said it was all about managing the levels of anxiety in a group of people. Too much and they won't be their usual generous selves, too little and you get nothing done. It's good to be able to put some of that stuff into practice! :)

Let me start by saying that –

I'm not here today to speak about my personal views.

... though anyone who wants to Google my name can find those. I'll just be addressing the motion before the Assembly. But a few comments about my own views might be helpful to establish a little common ground.

- I accept that the only biblical ideal, design or pattern of marriage is heterosexual.
- I accept that Leviticus and Romans condemn every case of same-sex intercourse of which they are aware, and probably any that they could reasonably foresee.

This may help put us on the same page in how we approach these issues biblically, even though, as many of you know, I also support marriage equality for people who are same-sex oriented. And that brings us to what I think is the basic issue:

We need to come to terms with same-sex orientation.

When I say same-sex orientation, I mean same-sex attraction that seems to be permanent, involuntary and exclusive. That is to say, it is experienced just like most of us experience heterosexual attraction. Not every case is like this, but there are plenty that are, and they are the ones that present us with the most challenges. These challenges appear especially in pastoral care, in mission and public advocacy, in public life generally, and for many of us, in personal and family relationships.

(For readers: See [Some Practical Scenarios for Discussion](#)⁸ for examples.)

Conservative figures give the rate of same-sex orientation at 1-2% of any population. That means that if those present here today were representative of Australian society, there should be 4 or 5 same-sex oriented people in this room right now. You can do the maths for your own church or youth group. That is more than 3,500 Australian Baptists, or 100 million people in the world. If we are serious about taking “the whole gospel to the whole world” we do not have the liberty of ignoring that many people. And orientation covers the most important questions that these people raise for us:

- What happens when someone grows up same-sex oriented in your church?
- How does a same-sex parented family, with two kids, come to faith in your church?
- How do you distinguish your views from prejudice or discrimination in public life?

Our society understands orientation as a trait possessed by a minority, over which they had no choice. Is that correct or is that not correct? This is the critical question.

Treating same-sex oriented people markedly differently to others is always going to look like discrimination unless you have a good explanation that it's not. You would need to say that really it's not discrimination, or that it represents an important moral distinction rather than a prejudice. And that would have to be argued in terms that *anyone* could understand, not only insiders.

In public, it seems to me that churches have not made a compelling *moral* argument about same-sex marriage: certainly nothing to match the very clear counter-argument about love and equality. If you can't make a clear moral argument about this, then you cannot distinguish yourself from someone who is simply prejudiced. That's one reason why our political advocacy has been, in my view, not only ineffective but powerfully counter-productive. We need therefore, to address orientation, and to address it compellingly. Moreover –

We need to do this *now*.

It is difficult to even discuss these issues in Evangelical circles at the present time. In the course of organizing a conference on same-sex issues and pastoral ministry earlier this year, I spoke to about three dozen Baptist, Anglican and Pentecostal ministers around the inner-city, and the prevailing feeling was one of weariness and wariness about this subject. A sense that there's nothing to be gained, and a definite fear of entrapment. That vocal and opinionated people will cause divisions, so that silence is a better response. This is a terribly inconsistent state of affairs for a moral and essentially communicative movement to be in – this in itself requires urgent attention. But there is also a pressing reason to give this attention now rather than leave it for later.

⁸<http://180.org.au>

I would think that few people, even in this room, doubt that marriage equality is going to pass into law sometime in the next two years. It passed by a large majority in New Zealand last year. Something similar to marriage was passed in the ACT and then invalidated by the High Court. A similar motion in NSW lost by the narrow margin of 21-19 votes. In NZ it seemed as if the churches were caught by surprise when the legislation passed, and have been playing catch-up ever since. It will be much better if our churches have a fully considered position before this becomes law.

And finally, I suggest that in considering this, we acknowledge that a significant number of people have had a terrible experience of faith and church because of same-sex orientation, and especially how others have responded to that. In producing a considered position on same-sex issues, we should consider whether, in quite a number of cases, significant apologies may be deserved.

Conclusion

And that's all I wish to say here today: For the sake of integrity in our relationships and our pastoral care, we need to form a considered position on same-sex issues generally, and most of all on the foundational issue of orientation. We can't simply leave it to silence. And for the sake of public advocacy, and credibility on all matters, including the gospel, we need to do this sooner rather than later.

I thank you for your time today, and I will be available to answer any further questions as this is now opened up for discussion.