

Evangelical Churches and Same-sex Orientation

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Abstract

Evangelical Christians and churches have difficulty listening to same-sex attracted people, or seen no need to listen to them, and so lack understanding and empathy for their experience. Significant numbers of same-sex attracted people are same-sex oriented, which can be understood as having permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction, both sexual and romantic. The number of same-sex oriented people is too large to simply ignore, either in church or society; if we are simply unaware of them, then we are failing in mission, in pastoral care, or in our personal relationships. Generally, same-sex oriented youth do not trust their churches with this information and process their questions alone, online, or elsewhere. Attempts at reparative therapy do not even claim to show that any individual can change, and reported rates of success in reparative therapy are not obviously superior to the natural incidence of bisexuality. As a result, life-long celibacy has typically been a condition of faith for a same-sex oriented Evangelical. Celibacy in this situation is distinguished from other kinds of celibacy by the absence of any future hope of a relationship. This has had predictably poor outcomes for faith and well-being. Evangelicals have been reluctant to acknowledge orientation as a trait possessed by a minority of people, and so have not grasped how naturally their position is equated with discrimination and prejudice. Our commitment to opposing marriage equality has not been advanced through publicly persuasive moral arguments, but rather by appeal to political force and religious principles. This, together with the perception of prejudice, has undermined our credibility in general terms in society. Finally, the Evangelical sense of weariness and wariness about these issues is itself deeply problematic for a necessarily moral and communicative movement. (Minor updates: 30 Sept.)

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Contents

How many people are same-sex attracted and oriented?	3
The problem of listening	4
The Evangelical experience of same-sex attraction and orientation	7
Orientation change	10
Spitzer 2003, Jones and Yarhouse 2007-2011	13
“Change is possible” in Evangelical writing	16
The expectation and experience of celibacy	17
Discrimination and Evangelical advocacy	18
Conclusion	21
Closing thoughts	22
References	23

How many people are same-sex attracted and oriented?

The term “same-sex orientation” is not always clearly defined. I will use this term to refer to permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction. For Evangelicals, the significance of same-sex orientation is most closely connected with these qualities, and the question “Does orientation really exist?” may be re-framed as “Do individuals have this experience?” So when I say “lesbian and gay Evangelicals”, I will mean people with otherwise Evangelical convictions, who also have this experience.

Nothing I will say here depends on a specific outcome from the “nature versus nurture” debate, say, whether a “gay gene” or developmental cause were discovered tomorrow. It would not make a lot of difference to know *why* some experience same-sex orientation and others don't. For all practical purposes, the distribution is random. Put simply, any one of us, and any of our neighbours, friends or relatives could have been same-sex oriented. More pointedly, if you prefer, any one of our children. The personal and pastoral realities are the same in either case, and must be addressed as they stand.

The figures given by Evangelical writers for the incidence of same-sex attraction fall between 1.5 and 2% of the population. We see this in advocacy, like this article in *The Punch*, *Gay marriage is threatening our freedom of faith*⁸, by Jim Wallace of the Australian Christian Lobby (“authoritative figures...”, 30 April 2012). We see it in writing on ethics and theology, such as Gordon Preece in *Sexegesis* (p.11), where he relies on J. Harvey's 2003 study *Sex in Australia*, that men were 97.4% heterosexual and women 97.7% heterosexual, with 1.6% of men exclusively gay and 0.9% of women exclusively lesbian, with the balance being largely bisexual. Higher figures in the range of 3-5% are widely used in other literature, but this figure suffices for the only point I wish to draw from it: that same-sex issues are common enough to be unavoidable for churches. If I were needing figures for any other purpose, I would need to begin with a lengthy comparison of statistics, but here I will simply use 1-2% as a working minimum.

What does this number mean in practical terms? 1.5 to 2% means roughly one in sixty of the youth in our churches and would mean, if we were genuinely representative of our communities, one in sixty adults too. In a church or youth group or school of 300 there would be five on average. If there were 300,000 Baptists in Australia, as in the 2006 census, and we were representative of our communities, we would have between 4,500 and 6,000 same-sex attracted congregation members. Our stance on same-sex issues will directly concern 340,000-450,000 of our fellow Australians, and more than 100,000,000 of our global neighbours. If we are not aware of this community in our churches then we are either unrepresentative of our society, or those congregation members do not trust us. Either possibility would mean that we are failing in some way, be it in mission, pastoral care, or our personal relationships. In suburban or rural areas, of course, this may in part be explained by the movement of lesbian and gay adults toward the inner cities.

⁸<http://www.acl.org.au/2012/04/jim-wallace-writes-in-the-punch-gay-marriage-is-threatening-our-freedom-of-faith/>

What proportion of those who experience same-sex *attraction* experience same-sex *orientation*? – i.e. permanent, involuntary, exclusive attraction. We can find an approximate answer in *Writing Themselves In 3*⁹ (WTI3), a 2010 La Trobe University survey of over 3,000 “same-sex attracted and gender questioning” 14-21 year old Australians. The study asked if respondents experienced *only* same-sex attraction. This was the case for 84% of male respondents, with 14% attracted to both sexes and the rest unsure. On the other hand, a little under 40% of female respondents were attracted solely to women, with 54% attracted to both sexes and about 8% unsure. There were also respondents who were only attracted to the opposite sex, presumably from the ‘gender questioning’ group (WTI3, p.17). A rough average gives 62% as a basic rate of exclusive same-sex attraction. If this is taken as an indicator of “orientation”, and applied to the 1.5% to 2% who are same-sex attracted, then we would say that 0.9% to 1.3% of society are same-sex *oriented*. That would be one in every 90 people.

As noted above, this proportion may be higher, though this approximates the slightly higher results quoted by Preece. For Evangelicals, even these literally conservative figures are clearly too many people to ignore: a quarter of a million Australians, 3,500 Australian Baptists (other things being equal), and 80 million human beings in total.

The WTI3 study also allows us to answer the question “When do they know?”, which will be useful in examining pastoral questions. Respondents were asked when they first “became aware of these feelings”, to which 25% replied either “always” or by the age of ten, and 35% and 30% said between 11-13 and 14-16, respectively. By these figures 60% were aware of same-sex attraction by the age of 13, the same result as in the previous 2004 study (pp.20-24).

The problem of listening

The discussion of homosexuality is beset by questions about what people actually experience. Can we know what people experience without listening to them? Can they tell us without trusting us? Do we know what we don’t know, as in the following, refreshing statement:

I am not a homosexual. Nor do I write this as an advocate for or against the ecclesiastical rights of homosexuals. I confess to a confusion about the merits of psychological arguments concerning homosexual behavior, a confusion I know I share with many people. I just do not know whether homosexuality is or can be normal or whether it can be as fulfilling to the human person as heterosexuality. (Scroggs 1984, p.v.)

These questions, and quite a few others, could most obviously be resolved by listening to people who experience same-sex attraction. Simply listening is not an especially radical idea in most situations.

The experience of listening to same-sex attracted people, Christian and otherwise, has developed in several ways at Surry Hills Baptist Church in Sydney, of which I am the Church Secretary. In the first place it’s a question that’s hard to avoid in a roughly 30% lesbian and gay suburb. More than a quarter of Australia’s same-sex couples live in the Electoral Division of Sydney (Census reveals where gay couples are¹⁰, 30 Jul 2013), which covers most of the region usually called the “inner-city”. If only female couples are considered, then the Inner West takes over from the Inner East (ABS: Australian Social Trends¹¹, 10 July 2013). This is an unavoidable aspect of life in our community. Our church

⁹http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay/assets/downloads/wti3_web_sml.pdf

¹⁰<http://www.samesame.com.au/news/10055/Census-results-reveal-where-gay-couples-are>

¹¹<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features10July+2013>

is a reboot of an old, defunct Baptist church, initially restarted under the auspices of a Baptist inner city mission. It was deliberately built as a safe space for people experiencing crisis, vulnerability or rejection, and this has been directly helpful for some who haven't otherwise felt safe in churches. Together with the Salvation Army's OASIS Centre, we have run a pastoral ministry conference called *A Different Conversation* in Surry Hills at Mardi Gras for several years, at which same-sex attracted people have shared their experience of faith and church, often for the first time.

The impression I have gained from helping organise this conference over several years is that simply listening to the lesbian and gay experience of faith and church is reasonably rare, and often taboo, in Evangelical churches in Sydney. There is a pronounced tendency to avoid or defer these discussions, to treat them as a very marginal concern, and to address "the issue" in abstract or impersonal terms. It is common to assume that those concerned are absent, and implicitly, and now and then explicitly, to exclude them. What factors prevent us from listening to their experience?

Three reasons for not listening are especially apparent, of which the most important is outright mistrust. Evangelicals reflexively marginalise anything that a same-sex attracted person may have to say about their own experience. Some of us are skeptical that lesbian or gay people actually exist; that is to say, that "orientation" is anything more than a rationalisation of habit, a delusion fostered to excuse a pattern of behaviour. This is what is meant when homosexuality is described as a "lifestyle choice". We might understand Christian scripture to say, to put it as bluntly as possible –

This is really a very simple issue: God made us male and female and always in scripture condemns same-sex intercourse as immoral, unnatural, abhorrent, and so on. So orientation is really just temptation. No-one could be "born that way," and if someone is being tempted, God will make a way out. If a person is being immoral, then they should repent, not seek excuses. When there were homosexuals in Corinth, they were changed in Christ! (1 Cor 6:9,11) What then could be the benefit of "listening", beyond asking whether they will or will not face up to truth and repent? *Obviously* we love everyone and want the best for them. But that's exactly why indulging denial can't help anybody!

As a result, Evangelicals will usually speak about homosexual 'desire' or 'attraction' or 'inclination', will avoid the term 'orientation', and will be especially reluctant to use the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' as if they were the qualities or attributes of any person. In other parts of society, of course, the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are taken for granted and abbreviated to LGBT or GLBT, with the letters IQ sometimes added for intersex and queer. I am not considering LGBTIQ people in general in this paper, but only same-sex oriented Evangelicals.

This stance of mistrust has three main supports. The first of these is a sense of disgust in regard to homosexual intercourse, which is linked with conscience or moral judgement, and seen to confirm the language of abomination, shame and dishonour in the Old and New Testaments. A second support is a commitment to the "plain sense" and perspicuity of scripture. This is the conviction that any person should be able to read and understand God's word on basic moral issues, and that it is especially clear in the case of homosexual behaviour. A third support is the understanding that no morally significant distinctions need to be made in regard to homosexuality, whether historically or in the modern world. The condemnations are simple, universal, and admit no exceptions. When these three reasons are compiled together, little benefit of any kind is seen to come from listening to gay and lesbian experience.

The combined force of these convictions gives Evangelicals a sense of confidence in their conclusions and a corresponding impatience with the idea that anything remains to be discussed. But these convictions also generate problems for Evangelicals on our own terms. Unless a sense of disgust can be justified in moral terms, it will readily be understood by others, and explained by them, as prejudice, fear, or social conditioning. In cases, that may be correct. When someone is asking whether or why Christian scripture should be trusted over the experience of their gay and lesbian friends and family members, what is needed is a not just a reiteration or reaffirmation of scriptural understandings, but a *vindication* that could be understood by anyone, and argued effectively in public life. Secondly, while the “plain sense” of scripture is generally sound, we have all heard overly simplistic arguments on that basis. And most importantly, some things which now seem plain to us are relatively new ideas in historical terms: the idea that there are better and more Christian options than capital punishment, is one good example. Thirdly, taking an overly simple view of homosexuality itself has often led Evangelicals to make public and embarrassing generalisations about lesbian and gay people, such as drawing causal links between same-sex attraction and paedophilia, or to ostensibly Christian nations prescribing treatments and sanctions that none of us would now agree with. Of the many examples, we might pick out chemical castration in the 1950s, or burning alive during the Inquisition. As a result, each of these reasons for mistrust – the disgust, the “plain sense” of scripture and the sense that the problem is really quite simple – require considerably more thought than they sometimes receive.

Building on mistrust, a second set of reasons for not listening come from the conflicted state of the Evangelical discussion of same-sex issues. By and large both Evangelicals and the LGBT communities think their position is self-evidently true and good, and that no-one having moral sense and reasonable understanding could think differently. On the LGBT side, love, equality and dignity are not up for negotiation: what could there be to ‘discuss’ about first-order moral virtues? Either a person acknowledges these or their basic humanity is wanting. Evangelicals, of course, believe they too affirm love, equality and dignity, because affirming what is good and true for people means rejecting what is wrong and harmful. The condemnations found in scripture are so deep and broad that Evangelicals ask: what is there to ‘discuss’ that wouldn’t just be ducking or rationalising what is already clear? Isn’t the ‘problem’ actually the clarity of it all? It hardly seems as if listening, cultivating more compassion, or correcting some point in our understanding is about to change the bigger picture. This is multiplied when Evangelicals read Rom 1 to say that everybody knows that Evangelicals are right on this, but that they culpably and irrationally suppress that knowledge: “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie...” (Rom 1:25).

Since the stakes are high and since agreement and even discussion can appear impossible, interaction becomes polarised: it becomes “the gay agenda” versus the “haters”, as each aim to shore up their own support base. Large sections of the Evangelical and LGBT communities do not believe that the other will respond to reason or values; they see them as a social fringe who may at best be stopped from causing any further harm to good society. Conflict is assumed from the outset and this assumption becomes self-fulfilling. Trust decreases, walls go up, rhetoric grows ever more shrill and grating, and alienation and offence is multiplied. We need to know who’s with us or against us, who will compromise and who will not. Like any sufficiently divisive issue, this becomes a test of true Evangelical faith in churches, and of “safe space” in LGBT circles.

A third set of reasons for not listening are ultimately based on biblical taboos about sexual immorality. By defining a series of mostly sexual Canaanite sins as abhorrent and detestable, Leviticus 18 and 20 sets up a deliberate taboo around

same-sex intercourse. This is reinforced in Eph 5:5,12, where “it is shameful to even mention what [sexually immoral people] do secretly,” and compounded by 1 Cor 6:18, which describes sexual sin as more serious than sins that occur outside the body. Scripture itself does not always give reasons for what is wrong with same-sex intercourse, often linking it directly to shame or abhorrence, as if the underlying reasons were self-evident, and Evangelical statements have commonly followed this pattern. But a taboo can only be distinguished from a prejudice by explaining its rationale. Obedience without understanding gives us only superficial piety, and is of no use whatsoever for persuading anyone outside of our own communities.

All of these factors, our mistrust, our social and political environment, and our biblical concerns, prevent us listening. And similar perspectives apply from the other side. The LGBT community and most who know and love them see orientation as a fundamental fact of life about which Evangelicals are in outright denial, and they attribute this to ignorance at best and prejudice at worst.

There are several especially obvious problems with having an inability to listen to the experiences of same-sex attracted people. These become most evident when same-sex attracted individuals grow up in Evangelical churches and cannot be cast as distant and dangerous political enemies, or linked with gay stereotypes. It should go without saying that we have to love and care for anyone who is same-sex attracted in our churches, and that we are responsible for representing Christ to everyone in our local communities, both to those who are same-sex attracted, and those who love and care for them. These squarely biblical responsibilities require both empathy and understanding, which can only be attained by listening.

Without listening, we are in the no-win situation of telling other people what we think their own experience must be. They reasonably ask “How would you know?” If Evangelicals want to persuade lesbians and gays that their self-understanding is mistaken, then that especially will take some understanding and empathy, and this will mean listening and trust. If we, as Evangelicals, bear a responsibility for reconciling people with God; it’s up to us to bridge whatever gulf we find. If our public statements are made without understanding or empathy, so that we are seen to be false and felt to be callous, then how will that help? Christians who feel tired of being misrepresented might apply the Golden Rule to that experience and so ensure that they take time to understand their neighbours, and to speak about them faithfully. People know if they’ve been heard or not. We need to ask ourselves if we can listen.

The Evangelical experience of same-sex attraction and orientation

The lasting impression gained by listening to the experience of same-sex attracted Christians and community members is that a same-sex attracted person who grows up in one of our churches experiences alienation and fear, expects to be stigmatised and misunderstood, and is given every motivation to stay silent about this issue. And that’s without any actual prejudice being expressed. Matt Glover, a Baptist minister who spoke at A Different Conversation, once asked us what a social worker had asked him some years previously, “How do the gay people in your church know that it’s safe to come and talk to you?” He had thought that *of course* anyone with these concerns would come and talk to him. But he realised he had no reason whatsoever to think that, and had not given them any good reason to believe that this would help.

In what follows, I will not quote the experience of any same-sex attracted person who is associated with Surry Hills Baptist Church or who I otherwise

know personally. The quotes which follow are, however, representative of stories I have heard (spelling errors will appear verbatim). These are taken from the 2010 La Trobe University study already mentioned and its predecessor in 2004. These studies surveyed 3,100 and 1,700 people aged between 14 and 21, respectively. No questions were asked on religious subjects, but in both surveys more than a hundred respondents mentioned religious involvement in their answers. How many of these stories could have come from our churches?

I go to a private Christian school and whilst I have not had to withstand any openly blatant homophobia from my teachers and administrators they have done nothing about the bashings, have lectured me repeatedly on the sins of my actions and assured me that I'm going to hell, and sit and listen as people verbally abuse me. (Adrian, 16 years)

When I was younger I used to have to go to church with my family. They are Baptist and have a particularly homophobic minister. Words cannot express how much I hate this guy who made my life hell for much of my childhood and adolescence. Due to his constant bible bashing I was depressed and suicidal for much of my early teens. (Randall, 19 years)

My mother threw me out of the house and said 'Don't come back till you give your heart to Jesus' (Chrissie, 16 years)

Knowing what was facing me religion-wise and with my family i was pretty suicidal between the ages of about 16 and 19. Overdosed on painkillers once and used to cut a bit and engage in other very dangerous behaviours like driving VERY recklessly, not so much because of people's homophobia but because of feeling totally trapped between a religion/family that didn't accept homosexuality and being who i was. (Peggy, 20 years)

When i was going through the religious conviction it was very hard because i hated myself which is a lot harder than when someone else hates you. (Ray, 21 years)

Some days the whole issue of homosexuality makes me feel depressed, alone and confused. I've been to the point where I've felt like it needs to end, that I shouldn't have to suffer like this. But there are two things that always have gotten me through the tough times. These are: 1 I would cause a lot of harm in my family. And 2 that God does not give a man more than he can handle. Therefore what ever comes my way, God will get me through it. (Daniel, 20 years)

In the 2010 survey, the 4% who mentioned religious involvement were more likely to report feeling unsafe at home, more likely to report thoughts of self-harm and suicide, and more likely to carry out self-harm, though their reported rate of attempted suicide was the same as for those who did not mention religious involvement. This figure may be biased in that those with negative religious experience would have been more likely to mention it than those with neutral or positive experience. But positive experiences may also have been worthy of comment; and others do mention these with surprise. In any case, that should not free us of concern or obligation. We should expect our church environments to cancel out the dangers in wider society, never to copy or even exacerbate them.

WTI3 found, across all respondents, that the rates of attempted suicide were about 6% for those who had never been abused for being same-sex attracted, 17% for those who had been verbally abused, and 36% for those who had been

physically abused (p.51). Those who had been physically abused comprised 18% of respondents (p.39). The motivation for attempting suicide in consequence is well expressed in the following WTI3 quote:

I have had multiple thoughts of suicide. I have acted and failed on those thoughts a few times. I am never able to actively harm myself (i.e. cut myself) but I've wanted to many times. I would say any gay person who says that they have never even thought about suicide is lying. Not being able to act on any of your desires, having to actively hide your true self, often having to pretend to hate the very thing you are. All of these things equates to a deep feeling that you don't deserve to live, or failing that, a deep desire to end the suffering. On a happier note, coming out has turned my life around. All of those things mentioned are starting to become a thing of the past. (Christopher, 20 years)

The following excerpt, from a letter received by a gay ex-minister of my acquaintance, is representative of many of the Christian stories I have heard at A Different Conversation:

When I discovered I was gay I was horrified. My Catholic family always spoke of these people as abominations. As a teenager I converted from Catholicism and attended a charismatic church where I was informed demonic spirits caused homosexuality. I was commanded to undergo exorcisms. The first two didn't work as apparently I had unconfessed sin in my life. I was assured the third worked. Sadly I soon realised nothing had changed. I hated myself for years and believed God hated me also. I pleaded with him constantly to heal me and make me straight. Eventually I was commanded to go to the Exodus endorsed program Living Waters. The program left me feeling suicidal and more unworthy than ever. After 3 suicide attempts I came to the conclusion I was an abhorrent and detestable human being unworthy of anyone's love.

As far as I have seen, heterosexual Christians have not typically spoken with same-sex attracted Christians about their experience and as a result lack understanding and empathy. I shall briefly list the major convictions that, for me, have followed from hearing a reasonable number of their stories.

- Significant diversity exists in human gender and sexuality, some of which, especially intersex, does not resolve into male and female categories at all.
- It can be helpful to call same-sex orientation an "inversion" of desire (at least when speaking to somebody only familiar with heterosexual attraction; lesbian and gay people don't use this term themselves). This makes the point that the experience is every bit as constant, complex and pervasive as their own experience of heterosexual attraction has been. This attraction is not limited to sexual desire; it encompasses the romantic desire for intimacy and affection, as well as the desire for life companionship and family.
- For a heterosexual person to be able to empathise with a fellow Christian or community member who is exclusively same-sex attracted, we have to try to re-imagine the tens of thousands of moments in our life in which we were conscious of sexual or romantic desire. We should have no trouble recalling these emotions, especially as we experienced them in adolescence, and the names of many of the people who prompted these thoughts. Then, we have to imagine that every single time, it was someone of our own sex who triggered these thoughts and feelings, while no-one of the other sex did. It may take a while to process how we would have handled that

between the ages of 13 and 23. Then, to empathise with growing up in church, we would have to imagine trying to reverse every single one of those thoughts, then filtering and censoring everything we do and say so that no-one can ever know this is happening, and facing this for years on end, alone.

- It should not surprise us if people crack under these pressures. One can't take a day off from same-sex attraction or romance, any more than from heterosexual attraction or romance. This is something that straight Evangelicals should think about whenever we feel wearied by merely discussing LGBT issues. We can always walk away from the "issue". There are people in our care, and our communities, who never once have had that option.
- As already seen, depression and self-harm are very common outcomes for same-sex attracted youth, and possibly more so in churches than elsewhere. Whatever our intentions, the present cultures of our churches are in many cases actively harmful, rather than helpful or healing, for people who grow up same-sex attracted.
- Same-sex attracted youth in our churches and communities do not generally expect us to understand their situation or to be able to help in any way. As a result they normally address same-sex attraction alone, online or elsewhere.
- Same-sex attracted people are the authorities on what same-sex attracted people experience. If you only guess or suppose what they experience, but get it wrong, then you will likely make wrong judgements about them as a result. If you could have easily checked by asking them, but chose not to, then how will that appear to them?

How can listening occur? Is there a same-sex oriented person that you would trust to tell you what they really experience? Allowing that they may have had a poor experience of church, are you someone that they can trust?

If you don't believe you know any same-sex oriented people, or if they don't trust you enough to open up, then it may be necessary to read a book to gain some kind of starting point. Scanzoni and Mollenkott's *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?* (1978/1994), or Justin Lee's *Torn* (2012), are both good options. For ministers and church leaders, there are a set of discussion cases in the accompanying document *Some Practical Scenarios for Discussion*¹².

Orientation change

In the twentieth century, Evangelical churches mostly responded to same-sex issues by expecting that a same-sex attracted person will change their 'orientation' and get married "like anyone else", or failing that, to remain celibate until they do, again, "like anyone else". To Evangelicals this has seemed axiomatic. Same-sex intercourse must always be a sin, and so must fit a common-sense Evangelical model of sin and repentance in which every sin is a free choice. "Sexual brokenness" or any damage to the will or the passions follows from past compromises of character, while sincere repentance leads to change, to freedom from sin, and to a happy and fulfilled life. So 'orientation' is naturally understood as 'temptation', complicated by past compromises. Obviously some sins can be more compelling than others, so that counselling or treatment may be needed, but it will be emphasised that God will not allow a person to be tempted beyond what they are able to bear. Because marriage is the obvious divine ideal for family and well-being, it seems entirely reasonable to Evangelicals that "ex-gay" or "reparative" therapy, leading to heterosexual marriage, should exist and

¹²http://180.org.au/some-practical-scenarios-for-discussion_20140906.html

should be effective. It will then appear to follow that the fault in any failure lies with the individuals affected, not with anybody trying to help, and certainly not with how Evangelicals understand the situation as a whole. In short, Evangelicals have avoided understanding anyone to be same-sex *oriented*, whether in the sense of a genetic trait, or in the more simply observational sense in which I am using the term here (“permanent, involuntary, exclusive”, see above). Whether this belief about orientation is true or false largely determines whether the constellation of activity around it has been good or bad, helpful or destructive, and ultimately either faithful or loveless for Evangelicals.

If the issues surrounding same-sex orientation could be distilled into a single illustrative moment, it might be the short conversation between the gay British actor Stephen Fry, and the reparative therapist Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, which appears in Fry’s BBC documentary “Out There” (2013). Fry asks, does Nicolosi take a ‘nurture’ view of orientation? Yes he does. “We resolve the conflicts that are behind the homosexual attraction ... based on trauma ...” He says: “it’s about the parents: the boy does not dis-identify with the mother, he does not bond with the father; we don’t believe he was born gay.” What is the success rate? For “a third, no change; a third, significant improvement; a third, cure.” By ‘cure’, Nicolosi means the development of heterosexual attraction, not the complete elimination of homosexual attraction, as a quote published by Robert Spitzer makes clear:

“A prominent reorientation therapist estimates that only about a third of the male clients that pursue a course of reparative therapy actually develop heterosexual attractions, another third diminish their unwanted male attractions and decrease their unwanted same-sex behaviors but do not develop heterosexual attractions; the remaining third remain essentially unchanged (J. Nicolosi, personal communication, November 13, 2000).” (Spitzer 2003, p.404.)

At the very end of Nicolosi’s book *Healing Homosexuality* (pp.222-23), he addresses lingering heterosexual attraction in “some” patients, and likens this to a well-repaired vase still bearing some small marks of having been broken, giving it a “wisdom” an unbroken vase will not possess. So he understands ‘cure’ as the establishment of viably heterosexual attraction and living. This is built on a combined understanding that attraction is a developmental disorder and that such attraction ought to be unwanted. Similar developmental views about lesbianism, though it is seen as different in nature, are given in other books, such as Jeanette Howard’s *Out of Egypt* (2001).

I spent the first few months of 2014 finding speakers and panellists for A Different Conversation, the conference mentioned above. In doing so, I spoke with a few dozen Anglican, Baptist and Pentecostal ministers in Sydney, and encountered a reasonably common pattern of experience. Some people in churches report same-sex attraction but then get heterosexually married and appear to adjust to this well enough, which is seen to confirm prevailing wisdom about marriage norms and God’s plan for people. Significant numbers of married and single people report that they are unable to change their orientation no matter what they do, and these most often disappear from church. If enough of these leave, then many churches remain able to believe there is no issue to address. And significant numbers of former “ex-gay” participants and leaders claim that orientation change is categorically impossible, that it represents sheer wish-fulfilment or group pressure, is usually later retracted, and that therapy was, for them and for others, harmful. Many more from this last group were willing to talk about their experience. As Fry commented after interviewing Nicolosi, “For all of his talk of success, Dr Nicolosi is unable to find one of his ex-gays to talk to us.” Those involved may have reasons for staying silent; they may not want to be the focus of attention (and I have heard that some of these ministries

in Sydney have received death threats), but there's an obvious gap in credibility when people are much more easily found to testify of unsuccessful efforts to change, and not of success. I have been to one secretive ex-gay conference in Western Sydney, and spoken to a few such ministries, one of whom spoke at our conference this year. What I haven't seen or even heard of in those circles are testimonies of general change, or confidence in speaking publicly about it. In *Sexegesis*, for example, under the chapter heading "The reality of change" (p.148), the Sydney Anglican Rev. Barry McGrath gives only one example of "transformation", the story of a woman who "is not seeking to be heterosexual, not looking to be cured, she is merely seeking to live a holy and obedient life," and whose change is solely a change of will. Without knowing that woman, I would not suggest that this was an inappropriate course for her to take. But I would be very surprised if Evangelicals generally thought that this was the best-case "reality of change" that could be mustered.

In looking at orientation change, there are an enormous number of subjective and circumstantial factors to be considered, beginning with all the strange quirks of sexual and romantic desire in the first place. It is worth taking a moment to list a few of these. One person may possess extraordinary self-discipline, which others do not possess. Some may lack a way to describe, understand or acknowledge what they experience, especially in adolescence. A person may experiment or develop habits that are different to their orientation. They may engage in situational homosexuality or heterosexuality for a short period of time. The desire for a family or social acceptance may tilt the scales, while for others, emotional attraction may be more important than physical attraction. Some may be otherwise confident, popular and successful in life, while others lack this social confidence. Some may be supported, while others are isolated or rejected, or even despised and abused. Help sought may be professional or amateur. For one recent correspondent of mine, anybody reporting failure simply lacks the faith to cast out the appropriate demons – case closed. Some may be working with a range of developmental theories about same-sex attraction, or may regard these as discredited. Most significant, perhaps, is the set of options that a person sees themselves to have, what they must choose between, or give up, and whether they have to choose under duress or in a crisis moment. Having noted some of these complexities, what can we say about orientation and attempts to treat it?

Obviously enough, the majority understanding amongst professional psychologists is that "efforts to change sexual orientation have not been shown to be effective or safe." (APA: Practice Guidelines for LGB Clients Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients¹³). As a result, there are moves to ban reparative therapy in various jurisdictions including New South Wales. Alan Chambers, the former head of Exodus International, has gone so far as to say that there is no cure for homosexuality and that 'reparative therapy' offered false hope and could be harmful (Rift Forms in Movement as Belief in Gay 'Cure' Is Renounced¹⁴, 7 Jul 2012). When Exodus shut down in 2013, Chambers wrote:

We have told them that they should feel ashamed or that they should try to change these things that we have realised we *cannot change* ... I believe that causes all sorts of trauma and I know that there are people who have taken their life because they felt so ashamed of who they are, felt like God couldn't love them as they are and that's something that will haunt me until the day I die. (Christian programs attempting to convert homosexuals continue in Australia¹⁵, 31 Jul 2013,

¹³<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/guidelines.aspx>

¹⁴<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/us/a-leaders-renunciation-of-ex-gay-tenets-causes-a-schism.html?pagewanted=all>

¹⁵<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-30/christian-ex-gay-conversion-programs-continue-in-australia/>

emphasis added).

Spitzer 2003, Jones and Yarhouse 2007-2011

Two major studies have claimed that orientation change is possible, and the second of these has also claimed that the process does not cause harm. These have featured widely in Evangelical writing on the subject. First, Professor Robert Spitzer, who was closely involved in the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychological Association's list of mental disorders in 1973, presented a paper "Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation?" in 2001, which was then published in 2003. His study was based on 45-minute phone interviews with 200 people who claimed that their sexual orientation had changed, and found that it was possible. 11% of those he interviewed reported achieving a complete absence of same-sex attraction, and significant numbers reported being happily married. However, given the difficulty of finding suitable interviewees, he thought it was probably very rare. Thus:

Either some gay men and lesbians, following reparative therapy, actually change their predominantly homosexual orientation to a predominantly heterosexual orientation or some gay men and women construct elaborate self-deceptive narratives (or even lie) in which they claim to have changed their sexual orientation, or both. For many reasons, it is concluded that the participants' self-reports were, by-and-large, credible and that few elaborated self-deceptive narratives or lied. Thus, there is evidence that change in sexual orientation following some form of reparative therapy does occur in some gay men and lesbians. (Spitzer 2003, p.403)

He retracted this paper in 2012, however, saying that "the simple fact is that there was no way to determine if the subject's accounts of change were valid" and apologizing to anyone who may have wasted time on ineffective treatment.

Professors Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse published "Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation" in 2007, with a key update, "A Longitudinal Study of Attempted Religiously Mediated Sexual Orientation Change", in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* in 2011. "We report longitudinal outcomes over a 6-7-year period for a group of individuals seeking sexual orientation change via a diverse cluster of religious ministries under the Christian umbrella organization, Exodus" (2011, p.407). The update concluded: "Evidence from the study suggested that change of homosexual orientation appears possible for some and that psychological distress did not increase on average as a result of the involvement in the change process" (p.404). The authors are both Christians, making this study immune to the criticism that it is simply an expression of unbelief, though of course not to the corresponding criticism that it is simply an expression of belief, and this seems to be the most widely quoted study in current Evangelical writing.

In 2007, Jones and Yarhouse reported a 15% "conversion" rate with participants in the Exodus ex-gay ministry, this being when a person "reported that they felt their change to be successful, and who reported substantial reductions in homosexual attraction and substantial conversion to heterosexual attraction and functioning", and a 38% success rate, where "success" included adequate contentment with celibacy. If a high number of drop-outs (from 96 participants originally, to 73 in 2007) are presumed to be failures, this drops the 2007 results to 11% conversion and 18% 'success', though the authors write that some participants asserted success yet no longer wished to continue in the study. Participants in the 'success' group reported lower same-sex attraction

through the Kinsey and Shively-DeCecco measures. On the face of it these results show significant reductions in self-reported homosexual desire for a little over a third of participants. The authors consider this degree of success “fairly typical from psychotherapy outcome studies” (2007, p.285), and so consider the approach validated. The update to Jones and Yarhouse in 2011 reported improved findings with those who remained in the programs, getting somewhere near Nicolosi’s anecdotal sets of thirds, reporting 23% conversion, 30% chastity and 25% “failure”, plus a clear tendency for other results to proceed toward these three outcomes over time. (2011, pp.419-20)

Jones and Yarhouse	T1	T3	T6
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2011 Summary	2004-06	2007	2011
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Success: Conversion	-	11 15%	14 23%
Success: Chastity	-	17 23%	18 30%
Continuing	-	21 28%	10 16%
Non-response	-	11 15%	4 7%
Failure: Confused	-	3 4%	3 5%
Failure: Gay Identity	-	6 8%	12 20%
Data missing		4 5%	
-----	-----	-----	-----
Participants	94	73	61

The success categories comprise 38% of participants at T3, and this rises to 53% at T6, which seems to show significant progressive change for those remaining in the programs. However, these percentages owe less to the four who entered the success groups between T3 and T6 than to the 12 who abandoned the study over the same period, and the 4 whose data had been lost in 2007, making all the 2011 groups larger relative to a reduced study size. If the drop-outs are counted as anything other than successes, the success figures fall to 30% and 34% (28 and 32 out of 94). More importantly, if we don’t regard the acceptance of chastity as an indicator of success in reparative therapy, then we are back to 12% and 15% at T3 and T6 (11 and 14 out of 94). Jones and Yarhouse give the most pessimistic assessment of their results as 9% (p.424):

The overall T6 outcomes reported here must be seen as an overly optimistic representation of the possibility of change. What would be the most pessimistic prognostication of outcomes in sexual orientation change from the Exodus process one could make from this data? If one assumed that only the Phase 1 participants were valid representatives of a true prospective study (which might be true), and that all missing cases were failures (which we know not to be true), one could conclude that from 57 initial Phase 1 participants, only five attained Success: Conversion status (9%), six attained Success: Chastity (11%), and four attained Continuing status (7%). One could further insist that only Success: Conversion status represents a successful outcome rigorously construed. By these standards, only 9% of the sample attained success. On the one hand, this outcome refutes any putative claim that sexual orientation is not changeable; on the other hand, this is not an optimistic projection of likelihood of change for one considering that process. (2011, p.424)

After Spitzer’s retraction, Jones and Yarhouse is the key study. It is difficult to imagine another being launched, since Exodus shut down. What can be drawn from it? (1) It seems most significant that the definition of success in this study – having “reported that they *felt* their change to be successful, and who

reported *substantial* reductions in homosexual attraction and *substantial* conversion to heterosexual attraction and functioning” (emphases added) – could be met by anyone who possessed a degree of bisexuality, and so possessed both heterosexual and same-sex attraction all along. While bisexuality is not a large proportion of the population as a whole, the figures already quoted suggest that it is at least 10% of same-sex attracted men, and a higher proportion of same-sex attracted women. (2) The study’s sample size was extraordinarily small. Paralleling Spitzer’s difficulty in finding subjects, Jones and Yarhouse sought a sample group of 300 participants, but could not find even a hundred participants over the course of a year, even after deciding to accept some who had already been involved for up to three years (p.408). For an international network of ministries, working with an issue affecting upwards of a hundred million people, whose validation as a movement depends upon demonstrating the success and safety of their programs, this is a ridiculously low rate of participation. (3) This selectivity makes generalisations to a wider population difficult: it seems reasonable to suppose that they began with a comparatively optimistic, motivated and well-supported set of people, and it seems difficult for that reason to estimate what representation they would be of the total distribution of people referred to reparative therapy by churches or families. (4) The study accepted subjective reports of progress, despite acknowledging that these can be somewhat hopeful, and not uncommonly recanted later. One of the evaluation metrics, the Shively-DeCecco ratings, are based on questions of the form: “Please rate the degree to which you are [sexually attracted at a physical level to, emotionally attracted to, tend to become infatuated (or ‘fall in love’ with)] the [same, opposite] sex.” With responses ranging from 1 (not at all attracted) to 5 (very attracted), this seems peculiarly prone to approximation and wishful thinking. (5) Subjectivity was partly unavoidable when studying Christian change efforts because clinical tests for arousal were impossible given the geographical dispersion of participants, and the unlikelihood that they would participate in tests requiring exposure to pornography in order to measure arousal. (6) As you can see, the claim of 38% to 53% rates of success from T3 and T6 is based on only four more individuals self-reporting conversion or contentment with chastity. That’s only *one per year* (!), and not clinically proven “conversion”, but only *self-reported* change. Also, recall that the definition of success could be passed by a bisexual person. (7) Finally, Jones and Yarhouse note what is clear in the table above: that most reported change occurred early in the program, in T1-T3, rather than in T3-T6. This seems to question the benefit of long-term involvement, which must contradict the belief that many participants will have had, and which others including their churches will have reinforced, that there was no alternative to staying with the program until they did change.

So while the results reported by Jones and Yarhouse are, to my knowledge, the highest findings of any study, they do not inspire confidence that any church could expect these results. The results do not back up the claim that any motivated person could change from being same-sex oriented, nor have Nicolosi, Spitzer or Jones and Yarhouse ever claimed that they do.

What then do we make of this pattern that some claim to change, others to at least adapt, and some, after years working in ex-gay ministry, can still know hardly anyone who has seen any change? This could simply be what is seems to be: that people have varying degrees of both heterosexual and homosexual attraction, so that while most people are exclusively or predominantly heterosexual, a much smaller number are exclusively homosexual, and other smaller groups again either lack sexual attraction of either kind (asexuals), or experience both in varying degrees (bisexuals). It seems to me that this accounts for these results more-or-less exactly. But this doesn’t tell us whether someone actually lacking heterosexual attraction could develop it from scratch, nor then remove the same-sex attraction that they experienced instead.

The published evidence for change asserts nothing more than that “some can change”. This is the sort of result that leaves everybody unhappy. It offers no basis for thinking that everyone is able to change, but does show some people claiming to have changed, and it doesn’t seem reasonable to dismiss everyone in that category as a fraud. This pattern, while it does not conform to what the major interest groups would like to see, is not, on the other hand, impossible from either of their perspectives. It wouldn’t be controversial to say, in an LGBT context, that at least *some* people experience gender-fluidity, or, in an Evangelical context, that sexual behaviours of any kind can be learned, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

“Change is possible” in Evangelical writing

When these findings are summarised fairly, as I think we have now done, it becomes profoundly disturbing how Christian media, lobbyists and biblical commentators have over time selectively reported favourable findings about orientation change and ignored others, in order to sustain a general confidence that same-sex orientation can be changed. In *Sexagesis*, for example, Denise Cooper-Clarke quotes with approval the following line from the Australian Evangelical Alliance book *Beyond Stereotypes* (a statement footnoted only with the now-retracted study by Spitzer) –

Sexual orientation can and does change significantly for some people
– those wanting it and seeking therapy. (Bird 2012, p.124)

The Word Biblical Commentary series, on Leviticus 18, makes an even more broadly optimistic generalisation:

Change in a redeemed person’s life takes place slowly; nevertheless,
as a person is open to the work of the Holy Spirit, amazing changes
take place (Rom 12:1–2). (Hartley 1992, p.300)

These statements are by no means unusual in the literature. And they are, of course, understood by readers to mean that any individual can change. Accordingly, they justify the idea that it is the fault of the individual if they cannot. Their optimistic tone is lost completely if we have to qualify them with, say, “an indeterminate minority of those wanting it and seeking therapy.” Odds of 33% or 16% or 0% are the odds of Russian Roulette with four, five, or six bullets, not the odds that churches believe they are giving to people when they say they should change or be celibate.

When Christian writers give the deliberate impression that *anyone* can change from being same-sex attracted, this communicates a complete ignorance of both the experience they are discussing, and the applicable research. Since neither the experience nor the research are inaccessible to anyone prepared to do a small amount of reading, this necessarily appears wilfully ignorant.

However, these optimistic statements do reflect a normal Evangelical understanding of repentance and growth, one which works well with other issues of character and moral behaviour. So how do we reconcile this with the low observed success in “orientation change?” – how is this different? I take up this issue in the accompanying paper, “Romans 1 and Evangelical Same-sex Marriage¹⁶”, in which I consider orientation theologically. For now, I will continue discussing the practicalities.

¹⁶http://180.org.au/romans-1-and-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20140906.html

The expectation and experience of celibacy

Evangelical churches have usually expected that if a same-sex attracted person is unsuccessful in changing their orientation, they should be celibate. This follows naturally from the premise that heterosexual marriage and lifelong celibacy are the only valid options. Here is one Baptist expression of this expectation:

In 1975, amid public debate preceding decriminalisation of homosexuality, the Public Affairs Committee (precursor to the Social Issues Committee) published a pamphlet supporting decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults but arguing that the practice was “abnormal” and that many homosexuals “can be successfully readjusted to heterosexuality.” The pamphlet also recommended that those Christians for whom a “cure” was unsuccessful should seek divine help in refraining from homosexual acts, and that they should consult a family doctor, psychiatrist or minister of religion to resolve their problem. (cit. *NSW Baptists and same sex marriage*¹⁷, 19 Jun 2012).

My discussion of the practical effect of celibacy should not be taken to prejudge the biblical questions, which, as noted, I treat in a separate paper. Rather, I wish to ensure that Christians and churches really do empathise with the experience of their neighbours, and build this experience into the questions they bring to interpretation.

The WTI3 data showed that 60% of same-sex attracted youth were aware of this attraction by the age of 13; that means that Christian teenagers who are same-sex attracted will have usually spent several years trying to change their attraction by the time anyone else becomes aware of it. They are likely to have a good idea about their odds of changing. Probably not great, so that they see no sex, romantic love, or family in their Christian future. They are also likely to have a good idea how their family, Christian friends and church would treat them if they knew. Probably not well, so that they face the issue on their own. And they have likely been reading scripture and thinking about having a shameful and damnable desire that seems to be indelibly imprinted. *No pressure*. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see how well a fifteen year old is going to handle this.

In contrast, I have heard a senior NSW Baptist say during 2012 that same-sex attracted Christians should be “celibate like anyone else,” if they “believe in the transforming power of Jesus.” That is to say, we're all celibate until marriage and all have things to overcome, and for same-sex attracted people, changing their orientation is just one of those things, and the real problem is a lack of faith. But a same-sex attracted teenager in one of our churches cannot be celibate “like anyone else” because anyone else can be encouraged in their celibacy by the encouragement of their peers and the anticipation of keeping themselves *for* someone. Life without support or hope is a different proposition; to view this as more-or-less the same situation as that of a heterosexual teenager is uncomprehending at best. One same-sex oriented teenager later expressed it like this:

Mandatory celibacy for gay Christians differs from any other kind of Christian self-denial, including voluntary celibacy for some straight Christians. Even when straight Christians seek a spouse but cannot find one, the church does not ask them to relinquish any future hope of marriage (Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, p.17).

Community support can in some ways help, but even with community support, a life of celibacy still requires an almost monastic spiritual life, especially if it

¹⁷<http://rodbenson.com/2012/06/19/nsw-baptists-and-same-sex-marriage/>

is not the person's choice, and especially if they have had to face that from at least early adolescence. An excellent example of understanding and compassion in a church community (in this respect, the best that I have heard), but also of the pressure involved, may be found in a podcast by Paul Dale of Church by the Bridge in Kirribilli ([Same-sex Desires](#)¹⁸, May 2013).

It is a normal Christian conviction that sexual desire does not define who we are, and is to be subordinate to our reason and will. All the same, it appears more than glib for heterosexuals who married in their early twenties, as is the case with many ministers, to be saying so to people facing lifelong celibacy, as if their situations were quite similar. An individual may find celibacy desirable in certain cases, but both Jesus and Paul saw no inconsistency in emphasising that celibacy should never be *demande*d (Matt 19:11, 1 Cor 7:7,9,36). Baptists typically oppose clerical celibacy in the Catholic style, and see it as actually harmful, on these grounds. When addressing homosexuality, we wouldn't think of ourselves as "imposing celibacy" but rather pursuing holiness. However, though we typically do not express it in these terms, the low rate of observed success in orientation change means that our churches presently do expect life-long celibacy from at least one in every ninety people, as a condition of faith.

An illustration may be helpful here: Suppose we had an annual lottery in our churches, in which one or two percent of all fourteen-year-olds "won" a life of permanent celibacy. There would be a scandal. Celibate priests would be telling us this was unjust and that they at least *chose* their vows, as free adults. And yet, when we consider that same-sex orientation appears randomly in just that proportion of people, this is actually a perfect picture what we actually do, and think we must do.

These are the factors that I suggest most require our understanding and empathy. Without empathising we cannot meaningfully love anyone. In principle, our churches' lack of engagement with same-sex attracted people is due to a positive concern for holiness. But without empathy this can become lovelessness for all practical purposes, and there is hardly a more foundational Christian teaching than that lovelessness cancels out every last merit or virtue that anyone may possess (Luke 6:27-32, 10:25-37, 25:31-46; 1 Cor 13) – including ostensible holiness. In the familiar language of Matt 25, how we treat "the least" (and do we *have* least?) is nothing more or less than how we treat Jesus Christ himself, and he invites us to reflect on being judged by that standard. Very few of us in ministry are so exploitative or self-absorbed as the "false shepherds" of Ezekiel 34:

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick,
you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the
strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness
you have ruled them. (Ezekiel 34:4)

But when we consider the stories quoted above, are we doing much better than them, by God's standards of care?

Discrimination and Evangelical advocacy

What follows if it is granted that one or two percent of humanity are same-sex oriented, that this distribution is more-or-less random, and that same-sex orientation could happen to anyone?

In this understanding, which is common in society, orientation is a trait possessed by a minority. If that is the case, then it's not a stretch at all to see orientation as a part of human nature, a rare but not otherwise abnormal

¹⁸<http://www.cbttb.org.au/bibletalks/same-sex-desires>

condition, in that respect resembling left-handedness. Being a trait makes it a natural fit for discrimination law, and for analogies with past campaigns against racial and sexual inequality. Being a *human trait* would make it a natural subject of human rights, just like those issues were.

This, I think, is why Evangelicals have often drawn the line at acknowledging orientation, and why they have sought exemptions from discrimination law on the grounds of religious liberty, trying to frame the issue as their own civil rights, and even their own persecution. Once orientation is recognized, then these implications must be faced. Seeking “religious liberty” exemptions on a human rights issue is difficult to spin in any positive way. It would be much better to show that, somehow, orientation is not a human right issue, or that no discrimination is occurring. Failing that, it should be shown that if distinctions must be drawn, that they are warranted, are morally important, and are in the public interest. Seeking exemptions looks like special pleading, or at very least suggests an inability to make a publicly convincing moral argument about the issue. “Religious freedom” should not be used to duck questions of justice and morality; the historical purpose of that freedom was to protect such questions from vested interests.

As churches, do we discriminate? In legal terms, it seems clear that we do. Under the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act¹⁹, homosexual discrimination occurs either when a person is treated less favourably than others because they are believed to be homosexual, or when they are given a requirement or condition that is substantially more difficult for them to comply with it is than for others in the same situation (these two kinds of discrimination are called direct and indirect). It will immediately be apparent why religious exemptions have been sought against these definitions, as many of the experiences that I have quoted fit these descriptions perfectly.

Nor is discrimination the whole problem; rather it is part of a network of problems recognized in law. Discrimination which humiliates or intimidates is harassment. Public acts or statements which discriminate or harass are vilification. When complaining leads to the complainant being cast as the problem, that is victimisation. These are the normal understandings of anti-discrimination terms, and I would not have much trouble rounding up a group of gay Christians and ex-Christians who could recall all these experiences in churches. If we cannot justify discrimination, on publicly defensible moral grounds, then we ought to repent of it.

Discrimination burns our moral capital. The general credibility of our churches is currently severely compromised by our public positions, both real and assumed, toward the members and interests of the lesbian and gay communities. In *UnChristian* (2007), the Barna group found that more Americans aged 16-29 viewed Christianity as ‘anti-homosexual’ than viewed it as judgemental, hypocritical or too involved in politics. Though each were dominant perceptions, this one trumped them all (80%, Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, p.28).

Many in our communities think of Christians firstly as the angry “God Said Kill Fags, Lev 20:13” placard-wavers that they see on television, and whose images constantly circulate in social media. They set this beside the actual gay people that they know, and learn to associate churches with a biblical *death penalty* for their friends and family who are same-sex attracted. They see capital punishment adopted in the 84% Christian nation of Uganda, and associate us with the propagation of aggressive and irrational prejudices.

Compounding all of this, when a manifestly prejudiced or trite or ignorant message has made the news – say, “God hates fags” or “Eve not Steve” or “bestiality next” – no counter-message from the rest of us has cut through; and

¹⁹http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/aa1977204/s49zg.html

certainly no credible message of hope and compassion. Our public theology has more-or-less ignored the foundational Pauline concern that our lives and conduct should win the respect of outsiders, or that if we do have enemies, they should have no legitimate critiques to make of us, so that the progress of the gospel would not be hindered (1 Thess 4:12, Col 4:5, 1 Tim 3:7 cf. 1 Pet 2:11-12, 3:16; or the implications of 1 Thess 2:16, Rom 2:24,3:8, 1 Cor 9:12).

So to many people, churches like ours are social evils. When our heterosexual neighbours think we hate their gay friends, family and colleagues, they will trust them over us in every conflict of interest, difference of opinion, or determination of credibility or morality, and will dismiss our arguments as rationalisations. This makes it easy for anti-Christian activists to characterise churches and Christians as primitive, parochial and wilfully ignorant (e.g. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Press, 2006, pp.289-91).

An inability to listen, understand or empathise on this subject prevents Evangelicals realising how we are perceived by the large number of straight non-Christians who have same-sex attracted friends and family members whom they love, who accept that they have not chosen to be same-sex attracted. It seems self-evident that their loved ones are not harming anybody by being in same-sex relationships or marriages – or at least no more than straight relationships or marriages do. Evangelicals, who haven't persuaded them that this is a moral problem or a social danger, seem to want to meddle in their private lives. Do we want a return to the old days of forced treatments and legal sanctions? We have never, after all, apologised for Christian complicity in those actions. Why then *should* they trust us?

This mistrust of Evangelicals is compounded by the way we argue in public. The reasons that we use in advocacy are different from the ones we use in our in-church conversations. Public advocacy against same-sex marriage has faced a simple moral argument about love and equality that is comprehensible to almost anyone, is deeply personal, and touches on the deepest human hopes for love and companionship. Against this, Evangelicals have made a series of complex, abstract arguments about ideals and traditions, the interests of their group, and their own fears of social harm. I was present when our largest denominations made their submissions to the Australian Senate Inquiry into Same-Sex Marriage, and these arguments were made without conspicuous conviction or personal investment. It is apparent to everyone that those who object to same-sex marriage do so because they think same-sex intercourse is biblically immoral, which of course is what is emphasised in private contexts like churches, or in advocacy like the "Australian Marriage Week" newsletter. A sudden preoccupation to "stand up for marriage" after having said little or nothing, for many years, against 30%+ rates of infidelity, or 50% rates of divorce, in order to rail against a fraction of 1-2% who are same-sex oriented who would like nothing more than to pledge some fidelity, is discredited almost by default.

The public relations problem is that Evangelicals don't, or won't, or can't make their real arguments publicly, and the arguments they do make appear insincere and carry no real weight against arguments about love and equality. That is why public sympathy has moved in only one direction over time, and why same-sex marriage legislation now appears to have majority support.

In thinking through Evangelical public advocacy, there remain, for me, two lingering curiosities about the way that this issue is discussed. The main one is that the way we have approached the issues seems unbiblical. Paul in Rom 1 offers a strong appeal to common moral values. He says that *gentiles* know same-sex intercourse is wrong – a mortal sin, even – but people do it anyway and even celebrate doing so (v.32). In scripture, this is not some moral knowledge set aside for Christians; this *should* be something you could show to anyone. Why aren't we arguing like Paul? Why aren't we showing everyone compelling

moral truths, and taking the moral high ground? Instead, the appearance of disingenuity and rationalisation is allowed to undermine our credibility across the board.

A second curiosity is the sense of fear surrounding discussion of these issues in ministry circles. Amongst the few dozen ministers I spoke with while arranging *A Different Conversation*, the prevailing feelings were weariness and wariness; a lack of confidence in speaking publicly, and a palpable fear of entrapment. This is a wretched position for a necessarily communicative and moral movement like a church to find itself in, which must, for many, indicate deep inconsistencies and pressures.

Conclusion

Around seven years ago, I moved into the inner-city to address a few issues in Christian thought and mission that especially concerned me, but which suburban churches had generally been able to avoid, and one of these was “same-sex issues” or “the gay community”. In this time, I have encountered a wide range of people processing the same questions. Some whose faith survived rejection and endless ineffective treatments. Some whose faith did not survive those same experiences, including the friends and relatives of those affected most directly. Some who could avoid the issue, until a friend or relative made it a *personal* issue. Some whose faith became fuzzy and vague because they could not condone inhumanity, but who could not see any Evangelical alternative either. Some for whom the way the church responded to these questions was the biggest problem. Some, including ministers, who drifted quietly away from church because they knew there was no place for them. Some, including ministers, who were expelled from churches for asking the kind of questions raised in this paper. Some, including ministers, who don’t perceive an issue still, and treat these kind of questions with considerable suspicion. Some who have never been Christians, and to whom it is difficult to quickly explain this whole state of affairs.

Most common of all, though, is the story of the same-sex attracted youth who grow up in our churches and resolve the conflict they experience by leaving church. The best case then is that they decide that their church did not represent God and that God still understands and loves them. It is more common, though, that they lose faith completely. Quoting WTI3 again:

I used to feel completely terrible and suffered from a lot of self-hate regarding my sexuality (mainly because I couldn’t resolve my religious upbringing with my sexuality within myself). Over the last few years, I have gradually learnt to accept myself more and over the last few months I have started to actually feel pretty good about who I am. This is thanks to talking to a lot of people, coming out, going to counselling, working to resolve my past issues with religion, and in general a philosophy to be honest and the ‘real’ me. (Liam, 17 years)

It wasn’t until the end of the year that I began to hear of the option that there were people who were both gay *and* Christian out there – and as I read about this and challenged my homophobic upbringing, over the next few years I learned to better accept myself and know that this is who I am, and that it is religion that is misrepresenting god [sic]. (Markus, 21 years)

God taught about love. So how is being gay against God... I believe in my lifetime I will be someone who brings [LGBT] Children back to the Church and lets them know there is a place for them. I will study Theology and see if I can do anything for gay marriage, if I can’t I

will still help all the LGBT people [and] let them know there's a place for them in the Church and Gods Kingdom. (Andrea, 19 years)

Christians and churches who do not think that these are good responses may wish to ask if they have communicated any realistic hope of a better alternative – of better well-being, better authenticity, or better Evangelical understanding.

When we decide the right way forward is to “stand up for marriage” in a way that treats or seems to treat same-sex issues as an impersonal political problem, or purely as wilful rebellion, we guarantee that most same-sex attracted members of our churches and local communities will *never* trust us with their most important secret. And when we are perceived as prejudiced against innocent people, and unable to explain in public the morality of this position, then we guarantee that most of those affected first or second-hand by same-sex orientation, will never trust us on anything else. Ironically, the Evangelical self-identity, at least as I have encountered it in New South Wales, focuses on pastoral care, responsibility for mission, and having good communication skills. These are supposed to be our strengths. Yet these are the very things that have most failed the same-sex oriented members of our churches and communities.

Evangelical churches have responded to same-sex attraction and orientation in a way that has harmed people in our care, has alienated marginal and vulnerable people in our communities, and has undermined our credibility and witness in public life. There should not be a contradiction between love and holiness, nor between biblical faithfulness and the equally biblical demands of love and compassion. It seems to follow that either our understanding of scripture, or our application and outworking of our scriptural convictions – or both – are at present badly broken.

In the paper which follows, *Romans 1 and Evangelical Same-sex Marriage*²⁰, I suggest that our problem is fundamentally theological. Whatever we think the solution to be, though, we must come to terms with the numerous inconsistencies and incongruities in our present approach to same-sex issues.

Closing thoughts

Having by now read most of the major works on this subject from the past hundred years, the great and lingering conviction gained is just how *early* these issues could have been addressed if churches had decided to do so. This could have happened long before they became the political land-mines they are today. It is especially sobering that, as pastoral practitioners, Christian ministers were far and away the best-placed group to resolve them. A recent book on sexual politics in the Church of England (Jones, 2013) quotes a strikingly modern exchange from the letters of a well-known Anglican minister and churchman. See if you can guess the decade:

Dr R. D. Reid was a former headmaster of King's School in Taunton in the United Kingdom. He had been discharged from that position after a trial involving some kind of homosexual scandal, the details of which are not known. Reid's letter to the minister argues that 'inverts' should not be regarded as criminals or insane, but as “A definite variation of the human species,” a position of which he was convinced “by personal experience, from knowledge of many homosexuals, and from the conclusions of the latest scientific investigators...”. The church, he wrote, had participated in a vast conspiracy of silence against homosexuals. It provided no pastoral support or information, and the subject was ignored in moral and theological works. “The attitude of the ostrich has only served to alienate honest lay homosexual people who try to work out a position for themselves.” The only official position that he had been able to

²⁰http://180.org.au/romans-1-and-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20140906.html

find was “one prohibiting all homosexual thought and action as being willful perversion of God given in-born instincts.” Yet “As homosexuals know perfectly well that they never possessed these instincts, this advice is worse than useless and serves to discredit what the church may say in other directions.” Ultimately, Reid charged that the Church “apparently approve, by their silence, of mental invalids being thrust into goal [gaol] on charges involving a life sentence – a curious treatment for insanity!”

Jones observed that “While Reid spoke of ‘inverts’ and ‘homosexuals’, the minister wrote of ‘others’ with ‘instincts’ and ‘tendencies’” – “I have known many others in like position to yourself who have by strength of will or by the grace of God been able to restrain these tendencies and I cannot bring myself to think that the position of those for whom you speak is so tragic as you would represent.” (p.174)

What decade did you guess for this exchange?

Dr. Reid’s letter comes from the papers of Cosmo Lang, the Archbishop of Canterbury last seen with a shock of white hair in the movie *The King’s Speech*. This exchange occurred 76 years ago, in 1938, and covers more-or-less the same ground many Christians and churches are discovering for the first time today. We ought to ask ourselves if it will take another lifetime for these questions to be resolved.

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