

Probably the Shortest Working Argument for Evangelical Same-sex Marriage

Nigel Chapman, 10 February 2015

Abstract

This is a short and simple argument for Evangelical Same-sex Marriage, which links to a longer essay. It argues that God sees these unions as true marriages rather than as either an institutionalisation of immorality or as a redefinition of the biblical ideal of marriage – and that Evangelicals should also. Evangelicals do not generally imagine that this conclusion is in any way possible. We haven't been asking the right question.

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The Standard Evangelical Position

For a brief statement of the majority Evangelical view of homosexuality, I will use the following comments by Ben Witherington, one of the best Evangelical commentators on Paul in particular, and the author of at least six books that I can see from my desk at this moment.

- Homosexuality & Scripture: Seven Minute Seminary⁸

What he says is this (and I've highlighted the two key lines, and pointed out anything I would change):

- The Bible doesn't talk about homosexuality, only homosexual behaviour.

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²http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/au/

³http://180.org.au

⁴http://180.org.au/probably-the-shortest-working-argument-for-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20150210.txt

⁵http://180.org.au/probably-the-shortest-working-argument-for-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20150210.html

⁶http://180.org.au/probably-the-shortest-working-argument-for-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20150210.pdf

⁷http://180.org.au/probably-the-shortest-working-argument-for-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20150210.compact.pdf

⁸https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMHXH_xERL8

- *The Bible says homosexual behaviour is sinful and inappropriate.* (I would add: *in every case that it addressed – see below.*)
- *The only options it acknowledges are celibacy and heterosexual marriage.*
- Homophobia, defined as singling out one group of sinners as worse than others, is also a sin.
- We can't be sure about the existence of orientation, but it may be true that some are same-sex oriented. (I would say: actually, we can be sure of this.)
- Every human being has sin to turn away from.
- We love everyone, but we don't love their sin.
- Everyone is to come to God as they are; but no-one is ever to stay as they are.
- We're not going to baptize sin for the sake of cultural conformity.

This article is for Evangelicals who, like me, agree with most of what Witherington says here. But I'm writing in order to say that our kind of Evangelicals should also support same-sex marriages. And not just civil marriages, but Evangelical marriages in Evangelical churches; and not begrudgingly, but in confidence that God sees these as truly Christian marriages; and not by half-measures, but with clearly understood equality in every aspect of membership and leadership. And I'm saying that we should do so for perfectly Evangelical reasons, which is to say, for perfectly biblical reasons.

Most readers, from gay atheists to straight Evangelicals, will be quite confident that this conclusion is impossible, and possibly immoral and incomprehensible as well – certainly for anybody who agrees with the usual Evangelical reading of scripture, and the reasons that it gives. Those reasons are in fact the key issue. I haven't seen anyone make a thorough and convincing argument of this kind, so I accept that the burden of proof here lies squarely with me. If you read this paper, and then the longer one with much more detail, and you still disagree, then I would like to hear your reasons.

Why does this seem impossible? It's mainly because of two mutually reinforcing ideas. One is that same-sex marriage must really mean sex-outside-of-marriage, since it couldn't possibly be marriage in God's eyes. The other is that it couldn't possibly be marriage in God's eyes because homosexual intercourse is a sin in Christian scripture. So same-sex marriage, thought of as an Evangelical response to orientation, isn't even a question.

However, something strange happens when we *do* read scripture with orientation in mind, and ask what *exactly* is the moral problem with same-sex marriage for same-sex oriented people. (I'll discuss "orientation" shortly.) What we find is that Witherington's outline, and Evangelical interpretation overall, is basically correct. But only basically. While it's perfect 98% of the time, there is a final 2%, the case of same-sex orientation, that we get almost completely backwards.

- *The Bible says homosexual behaviour is sinful and inappropriate.*
 - Which is true for every case that Scripture addressed.
 - But we should still notice that the reasons for which it condemns them don't apply to a same-sex oriented person in a same-sex marriage.*
 - This has been evident in our inability to mount a publicly persuasive argument that same-sex marriage is specifically *immoral*.
- *The only options [the Bible] acknowledges are celibacy and heterosexual marriage.*

- Which is the common-sense ideal for most people; especially in pre-modern times when survival depended upon it.
- But we should still notice that, for a same-sex oriented person, a “heterosexual marriage” is only ever half-heterosexual – it’s not the biblical ideal.
- For that person, a same-sex marriage fulfils the biblical ideal better than mandatory celibacy or (half-) heterosexual marriages do, and better than some things that God recognized as marriages in scripture.*

The points I’ve asterisked (*) must be unpacked in much more detail. But if this general understanding is correct, then both major Evangelical reasons for opposing same-sex marriage *including in churches* are simply inapplicable to the most important case before us, and neither one can be used to support the other. Rather, it follows that gay and lesbian people, and Evangelicals especially, should simply marry – and do so as Christian disciples. Evangelicals believe that heterosexual marriage resolves the many moral problems that arise from heterosexual desire and intercourse. In this view, same-sex marriage does the same.

What I will say here in reply to Witherington’s synopsis could be directed at greater length to Robert Gagnon, Michael Brown, or Wesley Hill – it applies to, and I would say disentangles and enlightens, every foundationally Evangelical position. It extends and, I think, completes the different approaches taken by Matthew Vines or David Gushee. Most recent authors have taken reasonable account of the practical day-to-day problems that same-sex oriented Evangelicals face in churches. This should be seen as the basic starting-point of all sides, and I will presuppose it in what follows. For my own summary of those issues, and some discussion questions on this subject, see:

- [Evangelical Churches and Same Sex Orientation](#)⁹
- [Some Practical Scenarios for Discussion](#)¹⁰

Orientation plus Marriage

In scripture same-sex intercourse is always wrong, marriage is always heterosexual, and orientation is nowhere in sight. This led Evangelicals to deny orientation for many years, at best supposing that a bit of counseling would sort things out, and finally to settle on saying that orientation just doesn’t change anything in moral terms. Same-sex marriage, as a question, is precluded by the moral issues with same-sex intercourse and the biblical impossibility of same-sex marriages. These appear to be the indisputable foundations of any sensible discussion. I will argue that in the case of orientation and marriage *together*, neither of these starting points are sound, that in fact they are wrong in obvious ways, and wrong on precisely Evangelical grounds. This, I suggest, is because we’ve been asking the wrong questions.

The right question is what to make of same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage, considered together, and considered specifically for Evangelicals. That is the basic pastoral question when at least 1 in 60 people grow up same-sex oriented in every church. And it is the basic missional question when that ratio reflects 100,000,000 people in your world, and when some of them are same-sex married members of your own local communities.

⁹http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation_20140906.html

¹⁰http://180.org.au/some-practical-scenarios-for-discussion_20140906.html

When we ask the proper question, this is what we find:

- Whatever we think about genetics, it is straightforward to discover that at least 1 in 60 people experience permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction. Some people can adapt to heterosexual attraction or marriage, but not these. That’s orientation for all practical purposes. We *can* be sure about this; that’s the main change I would make to Witherington’s list.
- As Witherington notes, and I agree, scripture does not address orientation. Some think it does, and I comment on that view in the article I link below, but I’ll go with the majority for now. This means that an Evangelical position on orientation has to be inferred from what the Bible says about same-sex intercourse and heterosexual marriage.
- The single, central question for Evangelicals is the combined case of same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage. If this is biblical and moral, then homosexual and heterosexual Evangelicals face more-or-less the same marriage-or-celibacy choice. In this case, same-sex oriented Christians do not bear a compounding burden of renouncing, all their life from early adolescence, any future hope of romance or of sexual love. And if same-sex marriage is a godly option for them, and I argue that it is, then virtually all our biblical and pastoral and missional problems surrounding homosexuality disappear.
- This argument turns on two unexpected findings. Firstly, same-sex marriage, understood as a marriage between two same-sex oriented people, answers to *none* of the biblical reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse. Literally not one. There are twelve of those by my count, and I evaluate them in the article linked below. Some of these reasons are simply and obviously inapplicable: idolatry, corruption of heterosexual desire, unfaithfulness and promiscuity, grooming and feminisation, prostitution, exploitation, disease, and sexual compulsion. But there are other reasons which certainly *appear* to apply – unnaturalness, social harm, the created order, and moral disgust or legitimate shame. Yet on examination, these are quite unable to support the biblical condemnations of immorality and abhorrence in the absence of the first eight. Those first eight reasons are fairly described as unnatural, socially harmful, disordered, and repulsive. But Christian scripture never asked these final four reasons to stand alone, as modern Evangelicals have done. They simply can’t carry the weight.
- For many, this will be a surprising conclusion. Yet I think it is apparent in Evangelical public advocacy: No-one argues in the public sphere that same-sex marriages are manifestly immoral and abhorrent. Why not? Isn’t that what Scripture says about same-sex intercourse? If its condemnations apply to this case as well, then why don’t Evangelicals argue or demonstrate that? This would show us to be operating from the moral high ground rather than prejudice, as is more generally supposed. I suggest that we don’t because we can’t, because the cases are in fact dissimilar; which is to say, because scripture did not address this case. In the biblical world, those first eight issues *were* the major same-sex issues. The biblical condemnations made just as much sense as their parallel condemnations of adultery; that is why Paul in Romans expects pagans to *understand* that what he condemns is wrong. Understanding these condemnations shows them to apply to all analogous cases today. But it also shows that they do not condemn same-sex marriages as immoral, the case that matters most.

- So how do same-sex marriages compare with the acknowledged ideal, which is biblical and heterosexual, and is, for most people, perfectly desirable and beneficial? Same-sex marriage fulfils every aspect of the biblical ideal of marriage that is actually possible for a same-sex oriented person to fulfil: a lifelong union of sexual and romantic intimacy, of care and companionship, of faithful monogamy, and the possibility of raising a family. The only aspects of the ideal that are missing from this picture are the ones precluded by a constitutional incapacity for heterosexual attraction, whether sexual or romantic. Such marriages were not socially viable in pre-modern societies, but they are certainly viable now. They offer a dramatically better experience of life for same-sex oriented people than either half-heterosexual marriage or mandated life-long celibacy. The absence of a biblical and moral condemnation (see above) changes everything in our evaluation of them.
- But does God acknowledge them as marriages? That is the decisive Evangelical question; and one that has been skirted by arguments for covenantal unions, such as David Gushee has offered. It is here that we make a second unexpected finding. Unions God acknowledged to be marriages in scripture included the polygamous marriages of Moses, Abraham and David, amongst others, and amongst other frankly deficient arrangements. These matched only a subset of the created ideal, doing without monogamy or mutuality, or the lifelong unity of just two people, and those husbands could have chosen better. Yet if these were still true marriages in God's sight – against which he would judge adultery, for example – then marriages much closer to God's ideal must also be true marriages in God's sight. Same-sex marriages fulfil *every* aspect of God's ideal that the two parties are capable of fulfilling. Absent any moral condemnation, these are better marriages by God's standards than many God acknowledged as true marriages in scripture. Moreover, by emphasising the biblical aspects of romantic and sexual intimacy, they are closer to the biblical ideal than half-heterosexual marriage or lifelong celibacy, supposedly the only Evangelical options. That is why we should say, yes, God does acknowledge these marriages, and that they involve no "redefinition" or "parody" (the new buzzword) of biblical marriage, nor any kind of sin or compromise. Rather they represent the closest possible conformity to God's ideal for two same-sex orientated people.
- These marriages are therefore to be celebrated and supported in Evangelical churches like any other marriages, with or without support in civil law. We should understand God's view of them to be decisive.

I have outlined this argument very briefly, and have necessarily omitted an enormous amount of detail. Each of the claims made above is covered more completely in the article linked below, and I invite critique or correction on any point that is believed to be inaccurate.

- [Romans 1 and Evangelical Same Sex Marriage](http://180.org.au/romans-1-and-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20140906.html)¹¹

How impossible is this?

It is difficult to overstate just how impossible this argument is supposed to be, or quite how heavily Evangelicals are betting

¹¹http://180.org.au/romans-1-and-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20140906.html

that no argument of this kind could be valid. Yet it follows directly from asking the single most obvious question before us: whether and how same-sex marriages match the biblical condemnations. Taking the biblical condemnations seriously enough to dig into their reasons and apply them to our situation, shows us why they have proven so difficult to use in normal public moral debate. They don't in fact apply to or condemn the case we must primarily address. Yet we have been convinced that they *must*. In poker terms, we've gone all-in, convinced our hand cannot be beaten. That's when the biggest losses happen.