

# Untangling String: Romans 1 and Evangelical Same-sex Marriage

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## Abstract

We Evangelicals, who have the strongest moral objections to same-sex marriage, have had a hard time making these objections sound convincing in public life. What if that was because we were wrong about the subject, on our own terms? This paper presents a biblical argument for understanding same-sex marriages between same-sex oriented Evangelicals as true marriages before God. It does this by asking three basic questions. Q1: Does scripture address orientation, understood as permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction? A: No. Paul's statements in Romans 1 show that it does not. A biblical position on this issue must therefore be derived from what it does say on other subjects. Q2: Do the biblical judgements condemn same-sex intercourse as immoral in the case of a same-sex marriage between two same-sex oriented Evangelicals? A: No. There are twelve biblical reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse. Eight obviously don't apply to this case, and the four that appear to apply actually depend on the support of the first eight. While they applied to all the cases they addressed historically, and to analogous cases today, they don't condemn the case that actually matters. Q3: Does God see same-sex marriages as true marriages? A: Yes. Absent any moral condemnation, the positive qualities of these marriages are unopposed: They fulfil the biblical ideal of marriage in every way possible in the permanent absence of heterosexual attraction, and are closer to the biblical ideal than either half-heterosexual marriages or mandatory lifelong celibacy. They therefore fit an existing biblical category of reasonable exceptions to the general and good ideal of marriage, which were still marriages in God's sight. Their recognition by Evangelicals thus requires no "revision" in theology or biblical interpretation. (Updates: 30 Sept.)

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## Could you explain to anyone why same-sex marriage is immoral?

Evangelicals, who have the strongest moral objections to same-sex marriage, have had a hard time making that those objections sound convincing in the public square. It hasn't seemed to matter whether that discussion has been at an individual level with the same-sex couple next door, at a community level in the local school or paper, or at a denominational level, or in the media, or before a senate inquiry. No-one is arguing persuasively and few are even trying to argue that same-sex marriage is fundamentally immoral. And yet by seeking injunctions against it, Evangelicals proceed as if this has been adequately demonstrated in public life.

It goes without saying that Evangelicals primarily oppose same-sex marriage because they believe that same-sex intercourse is immoral, and that same-sex marriage institutionalises that immorality. But if so, why can't this be argued persuasively? Wouldn't that be a clearer way forward than petitions or appeals to "religious liberty"? Wouldn't that show that Evangelicals proceed from principle instead of the prejudice that is more commonly assumed? Wouldn't that show that we are not discriminating against a minority group, but rather concerned for what is good?

The reason why we can't make these arguments sound persuasive is both simple and surprising. And more surprisingly still, it is both biblical and theological in nature. There are, so far as I have seen, twelve reasons why Christian scripture condemns same-sex intercourse. I write as an Evangelical who believes that Evangelicals are correct in upholding these, and their significance for today. But what do those reasons say about a same-sex marriage between two same-sex oriented people, the case that has to be considered? It is reasonably straightforward to show that none – not one – of those reasons condemns this situation, nor even, going further, offers grounds for withholding the name of marriage from it.

If the argument of this paper is correct then our problem is that we have never seriously put to scripture the combined question of same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage and seen what it says.

## A fifth alternative in Evangelical discussions of same-sex orientation

Evangelical approaches to same-sex issues can be split into four categories by the way that they respond to orientation. The purpose of this paper is to add a fifth alternative to the list, and to argue that it is in every way superior to the others.

Let me start by saying what I mean by the terms 'Evangelical' and 'Same-sex orientation'. By Evangelical, I mean that form of Christian faith for which God speaking through Scripture is the only determinative authority. This is particularly to be understood in opposition to institutional or traditional authority,

but without marginalising reason or spiritual experience. I think that is a fairly normal and historically grounded use of the term.

By “same-sex orientation” I mean permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction that is both sexual and romantic in nature. This does not account for everyone’s experience, and attraction can be fluid, but it does account for those cases that have been most challenging for Evangelicals: those who are just as gay as most people are straight, didn’t choose it, and don’t seem to be able to change it. I won’t be claiming that there is any simple binary division between straight and gay, or that a permanent trait is a wholly genetic trait (compare left-handedness, for example). I will be claiming, though, that we can speak of a definite, sizeable group of people who have this experience. This remains so even if we reject any concept of a determinative “sexual identity”, and speak rather about identity in Christ.

**First Alternative.** It is common, though decreasingly so, for Evangelicals to argue or to act as if same-sex orientation does not exist. From this perspective, “homosexuality” is a practice rather than a trait, and “orientation” is a self-serving rationalisation of an immoral “lifestyle choice.” A sin is necessarily a choice, and the Bible is emphatic that same-sex intercourse is both immoral and abhorrent – certainly a sin, and so, just as certainly a choice. In this understanding, “homosexuality” is just sexual temptation, although of an admittedly addictive kind. No person could be “born that way,” and God always makes it possible to overcome temptation, so there is no exception to be made in the case that a person proves unable to overcome their temptation; the fault lies with them, not with God. If a person won’t acknowledge their sins and repent, what is there to discuss? Robert Gagnon, for example, writes in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*:

A believer’s identity does not consist in the satisfaction of sexual urges. The issue is not “who I am” – self-avowed homosexuals sometimes justify their behaviour by claiming that this is who they are, they cannot deny *their* “true selves” – but “who does God intend me to be.” The life lived in a lie is the life that refuses to conform to the truth of God: “who exchanged the truth of God for a lie ... exchanged the natural use for that which is contrary to nature” (Rom 1:25-26). God, not ourselves, is the standard of truth. (Gagnon 2001, p.451, emph. in original)

The obvious strength of arguments of this kind, for Christians, is that they give full weight to very clear biblical statements about immorality and abhorrence. There is no hint of compromise, avoidance, or purposeful vagueness about this position. The envisaged war between holiness and sexual urges can only leave so-called “orientation” on the side of the urges.

Gagnon, and most supporters of this first alternative are surely right that first Leviticus, and then Romans, condemn in absolute terms every form of same-sex relation of which they are aware, and probably any that they could reasonably foresee. Why then do I, who agree with him on this point, disagree completely in my main conclusions? In Gagnon’s view, orientation contradicts gospel and scripture, and so cannot exist in the form that “gay people” describe it. It’s a lie, which “gay marriage” wants to make into an institution. In my view, though, when we put to Scripture the questions posed by same-sex orientation *and* marriage (considered together), we find its condemnations don’t apply. That means that there is simply no need for Evangelicals to deny that orientation exists in the form that people we know actually describe it, or see their descriptions as essentially fraudulent. Someone who does not know whether orientation exists or not could therefore read this paper to answer the question: “Hypothetically, what if orientation *did* exist? What would that mean for our theology?”

This first alternative should not be automatically equated with politicised bigotry or culture-war ranting of the kinds now familiar on television or in social media, although this usually is the view held by those who approach the issues in those terms. Gagnon is better, envisaging a church that “must inwardly groan together with the sexually broken and offer support” (p.452). He thus challenges to the church to act, as he sees it, without discrimination and with love toward same-sex attracted congregation members.

Compassionate and empathetic responses to same-sex attraction have, however, been comparatively rare. I have outlined our pastoral and missional problems in detail in my paper *Evangelical Churches and Same-Sex orientation*<sup>8</sup>, which I will recommend if anything more than this following summary is required:

Same-sex orientation may best be understood as permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction, of both a sexual and romantic nature. This is experienced by a few percent of the population. Using the literally conservative figures that Evangelical writers have acknowledged, this would be one in ninety people: a quarter of a million Australians, 3,500 Australian Baptists (other things being equal), and 80 million human beings in total: the equivalent of a good-sized nation. This is a random distribution for all practical purposes, meaning that same-sex orientation could have happened to any one of us, any of our friends, any of our children. The kind of reports that we see of successful reparative therapy do not inspire confidence that any individual, or anything resembling a majority of same-sex oriented people, will be able to change or even adapt to heterosexuality. This means that the ultimatum to change or be celibate has almost always meant that lifelong celibacy is expected, and lays all the blame for not changing upon on those concerned, with predictably poor consequences for well-being and for faith – which are then also understood as the fault of the individual. 60% of same-sex attracted teens are conscious of this attraction by the age of 13 and go through their whole adolescence in this knowledge. If they cannot change, they see no hope of sexual or romantic intimacy in their Christian future. No pressure! We normally don't see this occurring in churches, but hear about it afterward. Frequently, same-sex attracted teens in our churches have no reason to think they can trust us, don't think we can help, and are confident that they will lose their friends and church and maybe even family if anyone finds out. They hear many stories of this happening, and simply learn to hide, and so face up to same-sex attraction alone, online or elsewhere. They listen to our politics, and what we say in public about *those* kind of people; and read scripture and wonder what God thinks about them. Their churches normally don't hear about or learn from their experience, or even understand it well enough to empathise. For a high percentage of men and a moderate percentage of women, the experience of same-sex attraction excludes heterosexual attraction, whether sexual or romantic. Shoe-horning a same-sex oriented person into a half-heterosexual marriage would not fulfil any biblical ideal of marriage, because neither sexual nor romantic attraction would be mutual in that relationship.

These issues are sufficiently well known by now that Evangelicals have developed several ways of acknowledging that some people, in society and in our churches, do have this experience of permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction through no apparent choice of their own.

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<sup>8</sup>[http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation\\_20140906.html](http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation_20140906.html)

**Second Alternative.** When Christians feel unable to reconcile same-sex orientation with the biblical prohibitions, they sometimes respond by ignoring or discarding the prohibitions. In theologically liberal circles this is done in an explicit and acknowledged way. In Dan Via's debate with Robert Gagnon, for example, his understanding of scripture allows one part to be set aside if it appears inferior to other parts:

When there is theological or ethical conflict in the canon, conscientious Christians simply have to decide to which side they will give priority. (Via and Gagnon, p.10)

The same thing can be done implicitly by Evangelicals, by focusing on those parts of scripture with which we are most comfortable. It happens when we admit a dilemma, but then choose pragmatically to "err on the side of love", or otherwise accept a *de facto* contradiction between God's love and his holiness. It happens through purposeful vagueness or issue avoidance ("Does this *really* matter?"), or politicisation or staying "on message" with our preferred talking points, so that pastoral tensions are kept at a distance. Sometimes, it can be markedly perceptive and compassionate. Lewis B. Smedes argued in *Homosexuality & Divorce, why not treat them the same?*<sup>9</sup> that same-sex marriage is a new form of the old divorce and remarriage debate; something Evangelicals had and have no biblical grounds for accepting, but still accepted out of practical necessity, through knowing more divorcees than they once did, and through a sense that Jesus and scripture must not have intended some, especially abandoned mothers, to face mandated celibacy through no fault of their own. All these arguments, even that of Smedes, are arguments for inconsistency. Is there no more consistent option?

These first and second alternatives have a lot in common. They resolve the conflict by denying one side or the other, whether orientation itself, or the biblical prohibitions, and so they fit most neatly into a framework of conflict and threat between the Evangelical and the gay and lesbian communities. Of course, neither approach is helpful for a same-sex oriented Evangelical, someone convinced of both realities.

**Third Alternative.** Instead of giving up on one side or the other, a third approach has recognized enormous tensions in faith and practice, but also recognized that our uncertainties on these points don't affect foundations like God's love and Christ's character, or our responsibility to work among and love and serve all people. In this case, we reject antagonism or disengagement, acknowledge our uncertainty, and (hopefully, right?) work toward a solution. *A Different Conversation* is a conference on pastoral ministry and same-sex attraction in Sydney, Australia, which I have helped to organize. Its *Safe and Respectful Listening*<sup>10</sup> guidelines begin by saying:

*Relax.* When we feel tense and defensive, we speak in ways that communicate suspicion and mistrust, and others recognize that, and it escalates. We should have confidence that love and holiness do not conflict for God, and so be generous in spirit toward each other.

This maintains a high degree of humanity and humility in our engagement with same-sex oriented Christians and the LGBT communities, and this can be a pleasant surprise for those who don't expect Christians and churches to admit when they don't know something. As Andrew Marin exemplified in *Love is an Orientation* (2009), there are distinctively Christian ways to behave in situations of tension and conflict. Committing to love and serve in uncertainty creates middle ground for discussion and learning, which usually does not exist under

<sup>9</sup>[http://www.buv.com.au/docman/doc\\_download/906-smedes-l-homosexuality-and-divorce](http://www.buv.com.au/docman/doc_download/906-smedes-l-homosexuality-and-divorce)

<sup>10</sup><http://diffcon.org/files/SafeAndRespectfulListening.pdf>

the first two alternatives, as well as a safe space to think the issues through. But without using this opportunity to find a clearly better solution, the problems summarised above remain. “Holding the tension” is only an interim measure; it still means living for all practical purposes in the second or the fourth (the next, below) of these alternatives, and tends to drift to one of these two outcomes: either letting go of biblical convictions or expecting life-long celibacy from a random selection of people as a condition of faith – the usual fourth alternative.

**Fourth Alternative.** Evangelical churches that have engaged pastorally with same-sex oriented congregation members, but also striven to honour the clear prohibitions in scripture, have usually come to a position that sees itself as empathetic but firm. Orientation will be recognized, and a person’s journey with orientation supported by their community. But nothing is understood differently in moral or biblical terms, so that the only options are still to change orientation, to adapt to heterosexual marriage, or remain celibate for life. This situation is understood as a kind of “sexual brokenness,” whose resulting miseries are one of the tragedies of a fallen world, rather than God’s happy ideal for human life. This comes in two varieties, one which supports reparative therapy, or at least God’s ability to change orientation, and so encourages heterosexual marriages, and one which recognizes the rarity of any change, and so sees marriage as inadvisable and celibacy as something like an honourable, almost monastic calling.

Because this approach acknowledges that same-sex orientation exists, and is not the fault of the individual, nor a source of shame, nor something that cuts them off from community, it fosters a healthier social environment than the first alternative, though whether this remains consolatory in the long term is more questionable. It endeavours to respect the biblical prohibitions, though in practice will selectively soft-pedal the judgements of abhorrence, or of “shameful passions”, out of sensitivity. It still requires lifelong celibacy from anyone who is same-sex oriented, and so struggles with the biblical reservations about celibacy being imposed on anyone, and still imposes on a randomly selected group of people an extraordinary degree of spiritual discipline just to remain acceptable. It sees these negatives as morally unavoidable, though, and it is certainly an improvement that those concerned are not trivialised or ostracised. Still, this looks as if the church is simply coping with scripture rather than vindicating its judgements to those affected, or to those outside, who, without any prior commitment to scripture, see imposed lifelong celibacy as unnecessary, callous, and inequitable – and all through no fault of the individual.

So, while out of these alternatives the fourth is biblically and pastorally the strongest, it still has significant weaknesses in both of those areas. Most problematically, though, like every one of these alternatives, it neither solves the underlying tension between orientation and scripture, nor finds a way to justify the biblical judgements in the court of public opinion. It only seeks a way to live with those judgements, or rather, a way for *others* to live with them – not usually those who set the tone of discussion in churches.

**Fifth Alternative.** I wish to propose a fifth alternative that ought to be impossible, if the basic premises of these first four views are sound. I will argue that Evangelical churches should support same-sex marriages for same-sex oriented Christians, and should see these as Christian marriages before God, and consistent with every major Evangelical conviction about Christian scripture. That is to say, that in God’s eyes these are both morally good and true marriages, that should be celebrated, honoured and encouraged unreservedly. I will suggest also that this understanding resolves the underlying tension between orientation and scripture, by compromising neither on scripture nor on our same-sex orientated neighbours. All this offers a convincing answer to the primary question we face in public theology: “Why, in simple terms that anyone could understand, is the life of a same-sex married couple both immoral and

abhorrent?” The answer? It isn’t, and we can see that from scripture itself.

This fifth alternative will be argued primarily from Romans 1, and laid out in three questions. (1) Does Paul address same-sex orientation – the heart of the issue – in Rom 1? Does Scripture in general? And if it doesn’t then how should we? (2) Is same-sex intercourse biblically immoral, and morally abhorrent, in the context of a same-sex marriage, assuming that to be a marriage between a same-sex oriented couple? Why so or why not? And (3), does a same-sex marriage fulfil the biblical ideal and pattern of marriage for a couple who lack heterosexual attraction? Is this a marriage in God’s sight?

Before going further, though, it will be appropriate for me to acknowledge and address same-sex oriented readers, at least any who made it past the “First Alternative”, above. I do this partly for the benefit of others, since Evangelicals will often speak as if “those people” and their “issues” are absent, and we should get out of that habit. But mainly I am speaking to you directly. I am working from standard Evangelical starting points, which you may find alienating. I know that many of you will associate the passages I discuss with being silenced, misrepresented and ostracised in Christian and especially Evangelical communities, whether by current or former churches, friends and families, or in Christian schools. I recognise that this may open wounds, which in itself should be a warning light for straight Evangelicals like myself. It is hypocritical for us to emphasise faithfulness to scripture if we then neglect those parts that require us to be loving, faithful, just, hospitable, and much more, to you – let alone to seem below and not above bare human decency. Failing to love our neighbours as ourselves is one of the two greatest possible failures in following Christ (Mark 12:18-30). In Christianity, lovelessness nullifies every last virtue a person could have (see 1 Cor 13, from the buffet), including ostensible holiness. How we treat same-sex attracted people, in church, out of church, and anywhere, is nothing more or less than how we treat Jesus Christ himself (Matt 25:31-46). I know of no basis for saying that Jesus in history was gay; but for Evangelicals who pay attention to that parable in Matt 25, Jesus *is* gay – and lesbian – that is, he is *you* – and Evangelicals ought to expect to be judged by the way that we treat him/you. I hope that I can offer you a better understanding of scripture than you have previously heard, and that this will be healing and making whole, as I think theology done well should be. But you must be the judge of that; I thank you for reading, and I especially invite your comments.

## Does Romans 1, and Christian Scripture as a whole, consider same-sex orientation?

The text of Rom 1 is the primary lens through which same-sex issues are discussed in Evangelical churches. It is the only reasonably sustained consideration of the subject, so this is as it should be. Amongst others, Michael Bird and Sarah Harris have recently argued that Paul, in writing this passage, was well aware of the existence of lifelong same-sex unions and also of psychological, social or biological factors that were given to explain these (*Sexegesis* 2012, pp. 95-100). They argue that he was thus familiar with concepts analogous to orientation but that he made no exceptions for them and so neither should we – rather we must be faithful to scripture, not falsely setting love against holiness. Yet this overlooks a crucial starting point in interpretation. Paul tells us four times over in the text of Rom 1 that he is not addressing anything resembling same-sex orientation, whatever view of it he does or does not know, or credit, in his own society. He did not, I think, intend to make this point, but he could not have been much clearer if he had.

Let me quickly recap what I mean by orientation. As I have said above, and

discussed in an **accompanying paper**<sup>11</sup>, I am understanding same-sex orientation as a permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction. This consists just as much of the desire for romance and life companionship as it consists of sexual attraction. It can be helpful to call this an “inversion” when speaking to someone who is only familiar with heterosexual attraction; this makes the point that it is every bit as constant, complex and pervasive as their own experience of heterosexual attraction has been. Exclusive gay and lesbian orientation does not cover the whole LGBT spectrum, of course, but I will focus on these two groups, both because they are the most directly challenging for Evangelicals on moral grounds, and because they are also the largest groups that will be seeking same-sex marriages in our societies.

How does Paul show us in four different ways that he is not addressing orientation in Romans 1? Firstly, and most obviously, by addressing a *voluntary lifestyle choice*, of exactly the sort that many Evangelicals believe their lesbian and gay neighbours today are making. He speaks about people who “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” in a series of deliberate and culpable actions that formed a life pattern. But people who were never heterosexually oriented have never made that “exchange”; their orientation was not a consequence of voluntary choices. This distinction is reflected in the way that Paul speaks of “dishonourable lusts” or “shameful passions” (*pathē atimias*, v.26). Evangelicals do not link orientation *per se* with shame or dishonour, let alone guilt, because they see same-sex attraction as a variety of sexual temptation. Temptation, of course, is not sin, though it gives rise to sin if wrong actions follow. No person can accrue legitimate guilt, shame or dishonour, except by their own choices - at least, not before God, who is just. Why then does Paul see the passions themselves as shameful? Because, for him, they follow from deliberate and shameful choices.

Secondly, and similarly, Paul addresses a *progressive corruption* of heterosexual desire, to which he alludes in several ways: “God gave them up to degrading passions,” so that they were consumed with them (cf. 1:24, 26, 28). A person who has never had heterosexual orientation or desire has not, of course, experienced any progressive corruption of that orientation or desire. Of course, when Evangelicals look for orientation in scripture, this progressive corruption of desire is the closest match:

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans refers both to homosexual acts (Rom 1:27: “shameless acts”; Rom 1:32: “those who practice”) and underlying thoughts and passions (Rom 1:24: “lusts of their hearts”; Rom 1:28: “debased mind”; cf. Rom 1:21). (Köstenberger, *God, Marriage and Family*, p.216)

Is orientation, then, the “debased mind” to which “God gave them over” in Romans 1? Of course not: this was what happened to those who had *already “exchanged”* heterosexual for homosexual intercourse (see the first point, above). Paul is not referring to a lifelong predisposition, only to a consequence of moral choices.

Thirdly, Paul is addressing a *gentile problem*. In this respect he follows Leviticus, which frames ch.18 with the concern that six characteristically Canaanite activities are not to become characteristic of Israel (vv. 1-5, 24-30). Later Greek-speaking Jews would proudly write: “We are quite separated from these practices” (*Letter of Aristeas*, 152). That Rom 1 addresses gentiles as opposed to Jews is obvious enough from its defining emphasis on idolatry, but is also a feature of the structure of the argument of Romans as a whole: Chapter 1 is an indictment of Hellenistic society, and chapter 2, a corresponding indictment of Jewish society. Paul is adamant that neither the Jewish nor gentile factions in

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<sup>11</sup>[http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation\\_20140906.html](http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation_20140906.html)

the church at Rome have reasons for cultural pride or for precedence over the other – *all* are in debt to God’s grace. Yet if Romans was indicting a gentile phenomenon, or Leviticus a Canaanite phenomenon, then they were certainly not addressing same-sex orientation, which occurs in every race and nation, including among Jewish people.

Fourthly, in the gentile context, he is addressing a direct consequence of idolatry: *because* they exchanged God’s glory for idols, his truth for a lie, by worshipping and serving created things, “God gave them up” (vv.24, 26, 28) to impurity, sexual degradation, degrading passions, and a debased mind. They desired freedom from restraint, but then were mastered by desire; they suppressed their true thoughts about God, but then found it hard to think clearly about him. This is standard Second-Temple Jewish commentary on the Hellenistic world; Wisdom 14, in the Apocrypha, provides a similar but longer example, which concludes: “For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil.” (v.27). In all this, Paul and other Jewish writers were surely thinking about literal pagan idols and the sexual back-stories of the gods that they iconised. But none of that has been the experience of same-sex oriented youth in our own society. Evangelicals have therefore sought to generalise this linkage with idolatry, and so used the biblical metaphors of sexual idolatry (Col 3:5); or conversely, the OT metaphor of spiritual adultery. It is certainly true that people in our own society serve metaphorical idols of money, sex and power, and that these offer all of the distractions offered by the literal idols of the past. But this is clearly not how young people in our own congregations have come to be same-sex oriented, especially given that 60% are aware of this attraction by age 13. It fails as any general explanation of orientation or even same-sex attraction in our situation. Our same-sex oriented neighbours and friends, or family and church members, have not become so because of idolatry, whether literal or figurative.

By what it says on each of these four topics, Romans 1 excludes the possibility that it is speaking about orientation. If Paul had been considering *orientation*, he would not have presented it as a non-Jewish phenomenon, would not have linked it with idolatry, and would not have seen it either as a voluntary “exchange”, an intrinsically shameful desire, or a progressive corruption of desire.

This is foundational for our interpretation, because if Paul in Rom 1 did not address orientation, then he did not understand Leviticus to be addressing it either. We should read Rom 1 as a knowing commentary on Lev 18-20, for three main reasons: Paul writes to his Jewish audience on the basis of their scriptures, and shows by his allusions that he presupposes their familiarity with them. He then quotes those exact chapters in this letter (see Lev 18:5 LXX in Rom 10:5 and Lev 19:18 LXX in Rom 13:9, paralleling Jesus). And he gives us the earliest instance of a term for men engaging in same-sex intercourse, *arsenokoitēs*, that most plausibly derives from the *arsenos* and *koitēn* (man + bed) in the Greek translations of Lev 18:22 and 20:13. The meaning of the term would be clear from analogues like *mētrokoitēs* or *doulokoitēs*, a person who has intercourse with, respectively, their mother or slave. So Paul is certainly interpreting Leviticus, and does not see it as addressing same-sex orientation – or he would not have written in a way that comprehensively excluded it. Romans and Leviticus are biblically definitive on this subject, since every other reference is made in passing. This means we have no reason to believe that any part of scripture takes account of orientation at all. The question *should it have done so* makes for a good sized study in theodicy – especially when the history of capital punishment for same-sex intercourse is considered – but that will require a later paper, roughly the same size as this one.

One further point arising from Romans 1 should be considered here. Because Romans 1 uses same-sex intercourse to epitomise the immorality that issued from idolatry, and Gen 19 and Jdg 19 did much the same for other societal

failure, Evangelicals have sometimes viewed homosexuality as a kind of super-sin, a general exemplification of human rebellion against God, which is then reinforced by how they understand “Pride” marches.

Despite numerous attempts, even by some claiming to be followers of Christ, to reinterpret the biblical record, it is evident that scripture universally views homosexuality in terms of rebellion against God and disregard for his creation order ... (Köstenberger, p.272)

But let's set that for a moment beside the experience of same-sex oriented youth in our own churches: They certainly did not develop their sexual orientation as a statement of rebellion, so this is not a generally useful explanation of same-sex attraction (and on scripture's “universal” view, see the biblical reasons that I number one to twelve, below). If we keep the actual human beings in mind, it will help us to distinguish between people who believe in and promote immorality, and our own straightforward pastoral responsibilities to same-sex oriented people who do no such thing.

If it is clear now that Scripture did not address orientation, and equally clear that we must, then how do we do so? This is covered in all first-year exegesis classes: derive principles from analogous cases and reapply them. We should look at what Scripture says about same-sex intercourse and about heterosexual marriage, then apply its reasoning and principles to the combined case of same-sex marriage and orientation.

But first let me ask a perhaps awkward question. When Evangelicals acknowledge the need for empathy with same-sex attracted individuals, as it seems that we must, we also have to ask, *Why is that necessary?* Did Leviticus show empathy? Did Paul? As far as I can see there is none present in anything that Scripture says about same-sex intercourse: it is seen as immoral and abhorrent in a simple and obvious way, and deserving of strict judgements. That has to be accounted for by any understanding that we put forward. I think this underlines in a very practical way my finding that we are not speaking about the same phenomenon that Paul and Leviticus are. I will return to this in my conclusions.

## **Is same-sex intercourse biblically immoral in the combined case of same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage?**

When Christian Scripture addresses same-sex intercourse, it is always presented as something shockingly immoral, something that is abhorrent in a simple and self-evident way. The strength and force of these condemnations commit Evangelicals to upholding them, but also make it difficult to do so: there's a disconnect between those strident judgements and the friendly young same-sex couple living next door. In scripture same-sex intercourse is always at least as bad as adultery, but could you say why that would be so? Suppose you were having coffee with that couple next door, and they asked you: “Why exactly is our relationship so evil and disgusting?”

In public, Evangelicals have argued that same-sex marriage will be harmful to society, and that it poses a risk to children and to families. In churches we have emphasised that same-sex intercourse and same-sex marriage are plainly unbiblical. In both cases, this implies immorality without directly arguing for it, which is a strange way to mount a moral argument, especially against a case for same-sex marriage built almost exclusively on moral arguments for love and equality. What would happen if there arose a political movement to dignify and socially legitimate adultery? Evangelicals would straight-away be on the front

foot giving reasons we would think that any moral person would understand immediately. Likewise, when Christian ministers have argued publicly for the rights of asylum seekers, they have happily gone off and gotten ourselves arrested to make the justness of the cause even more apparent. Why not in this case? Why isn't this feared "persecution" seen as a similar opportunity? Wouldn't appealing to common-sense morals be more effective than another round of petitions? What, ultimately, is the matter with our moral arguments?

Scripture does not condemn same-sex intercourse for being socially harmful or even for being unbiblical (though of course, Paul is building on Leviticus). It calls it immoral, and gives reasons why. Romans 1 expects gentiles to know that certain things including same-sex intercourse are wrong. They do them *anyway* (v.32), not in ignorance. This is not some special moral knowledge kept aside for Jews and Christians, it's something that pagan gentiles ought to know, something that they are able to understand, something we can argue publicly from common moral values, just as, amongst other things, Paul was doing in Romans 1.

Now the biblical condemnations do not always come with reasons attached, so the bare fact that scripture unilaterally condemns same-sex intercourse doesn't tell us why it does so. Statements that same-sex intercourse is abhorrent or detestable, that it is dishonourable or shameful or degrading, that it is worthy of judgement or death or eternal fire, these statements only tell us that scripture addressed itself to a deadly serious problem. Likewise, when it appears in biblical vice lists. None of this tells us how to judge same-sex orientation or marriage. Rather, of course, we have to take the biblical understanding of same-sex intercourse, and of marriage, and apply it to the most important test-case: a same-sex marriage between same-sex oriented Evangelicals. So, for example, when 1 Tim 1:9 forthrightly lists *arsenokoitai* (the "sodomites" of the KJV) alongside "the lawless and disobedient, ... godless and sinful, ... unholy and profane ..." I suggest we take those statements more seriously than we have generally done, and juxtapose them with the young same-sex couple next door. Biblically, why would a same-sex marriage between same-sex oriented people be both immoral and abhorrent?

In what follows I will briefly comment on the common argument that the biblical prohibitions are simply primitive or obsolete, and then proceed through the relevant biblical arguments, which are twelve in number. Eight of these clearly do not apply, but there are four that most Evangelicals would think surely do apply (and condemn) same sex marriages: these are the arguments from nature, social harm, intended purpose, and abhorrence. In scripture, as I will show, all these arguments worked perfectly. Applied to similar contemporary cases, they still do. But applied to same-sex orientation and marriage, not a single one applies. As I proceed, I will be noting how this has become especially apparent in our recent Evangelical advocacy against same-sex marriage legislation.

So as not to prejudice the question, or attack an easy, artificial target, I will be making the closest and fairest comparison that I can between same-sex marriage and heterosexual marriage. This means considering a same-sex union between two same-sex oriented Evangelicals, undertaken as a deliberate marriage before God, with the intention of fulfilling every possible aspect of the biblical ideal. I take this to be the most important case we must consider in church life, as it covers the question of whether a same-sex oriented Evangelical may have a life partner, and whether a same-sex oriented couple who come to Christ must then break up their marriage and family.

So let's get started. It will clear the ground a little if I first dismiss a few contemporary arguments I find irrelevant or ill-conceived, but which have featured in public discussions of this issue, and with which I might be thought to agree unless I say otherwise. For some readers, this may be labouring the obvious, so feel free to skip ahead.

I take it as self-evident that is no Christian argument for sheer popularity (or for “relevance” conceived as popularity); and in any case, that can proceed in two directions depending on what is popular in the community in which a person lives. I will also be ignoring arguments for parts or aspects of scripture which selectively ignore others (love versus holiness, and so on); though I do appreciate the position of those who are trying to act with integrity in regard to what they see as an actual contradiction.

Much the same applies to arguments that the biblical judgements or laws are historically obsolete. The idea that the Israelites were “primitive sheep herders” (which they were, of course), supports a presumption that they will be found on the wrong end of every question of progress. The simple and popular forms of these arguments focus on contrasts between tribal and modern culture, or on laws and actions that sound ridiculous to us today (say, war-brides or mass-abductions as a picture of ‘biblical marriage’). But none of this would preclude God from addressing them, or us for that matter, who will appear primitive to future people. In the most simplistic case this treats scripture as a flat structure in which any passage can be taken as a guide to good behaviour for modern people. Needless to say, few Evangelicals even try to treat it that way, because that’s not how they think it presents itself, so I will pass by this argument also.

The most sophisticated form of the argument for obsolescence is, I think, the one put forward by William L. Countryman in *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (1987), and later adapted and popularised by Daniel K. Helminiak in *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (2004). Their key point develops as follows: The Levitical condemnations are about purity taboos on the one hand (“dirty!”, “unclean!”), and property concerns on the other, meaning patriarchy and land. For these writers, Paul’s use of purity language (say, *akatharsia*) rather than moral or ethical language in the relevant section of Rom 1 excludes the possibility that he sees these actions as immoral in themselves. Rather, Paul sees the old purity code as now having been made obsolete in Christ, in whom “nothing is clean or unclean in itself” (Rom 14:14). Homosexuality remains socially inappropriate, a comic scandal and not much more, in the Greek and Roman world, and Paul is playing with Jewish prejudices in order to undermine them. In these books there are long and detailed arguments affecting each of the biblical statements about homosexuality, and each of the important terms, but a dichotomy between purity and true morality is the thread running through them. This is what enables the rejection and reversal of previous readings. My own views on the relevant passages and terms will be given below, but I find these books unpersuasive because of this basic but artificial opposition of terms. In Paul and Leviticus, the language of impurity and shame *amplifies*, rather than excludes the biblical judgements of immorality; it is stronger moral language, rather than non-moral language. That is why Paul and Leviticus still link impurity with God’s judgement, and why Paul thinks of shame and dishonour in both relative and absolute terms: one may be put to shame before the world (and that, for Paul, should be expected in following Christ), and yet hope to never be put to shame before God, the only shame that ultimately matters.

For these reasons, I find these arguments from popularity, selective reading, primitivity and obsolescence to carry no real weight, and have no grounding in scripture itself. The arguments that do have weight, I will consider in two groups now.

## **Eight biblical reasons which do not apply**

There are, by my count, twelve biblical reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse, of which eight very clearly do not apply to same-sex marriages between same-sex oriented people. We have seen two already.

**#1, #2.** Biblical connections with **#1. Idolatry** are not a presenting issue in our own society, and even less so in our churches. Also, no **#2. Progressive Corruption of Heterosexual Desire** happens when a person experiences permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction over their whole life. These points have already been considered, above.

**#3. Promiscuity and Unfaithfulness.** Same-sex intercourse is listed with fornication and adultery in biblical vice lists (1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:8-11), and in Leviticus, which gives it the same penalty as adultery (Lev 20:10,13). In pre-modern societies of every kind there was no other plan than families for offsetting low life expectancy, for keeping up the population in the frequent case of war or plague or famine, or for providing social security in old age. All social honour built upon these bare necessities, so that heterosexual procreation was a universal obligation: two children were the minimum permitted by the Jewish Mishnah: "A man shall not abstain from procreation unless he already has [two] children" (m. Yebamoth 6:6). Roman laws and motives varied, but the *Lex Julia et Papia*, the laws of Augustus in 18 BCE and 9 CE, which taxed singleness and childlessness, illustrate similar concerns. Against this expectation, same-sex intercourse was almost always either promiscuous or adulterous, especially by Jewish and Christian standards, and so immoral by default on those grounds. Of course, in a same-sex marriage, neither promiscuity nor unfaithfulness are any more to be assumed than in a heterosexual marriage. Even though men are generally more promiscuous than women, gay and lesbian marriages would balance out, and, while secular society today and the gay male community in particular is more promiscuous than Christian society, specifically Evangelical relationships (since we are comparing like with like) would hold to higher principles. There is thus no Evangelical argument against same-sex marriage on the grounds of unfaithfulness (adultery) and promiscuity (fornication). Rather, same-sex marriage recognizes and acknowledges faithful lifetime commitments. I will discuss this further (below), including the question "Why doesn't scripture allow same-sex marriages?"

**#4, #5, #6.** Our fourth, fifth and sixth reasons all relate to the word usually translated "effeminacy" (*malakos*, "softness") in 1 Cor 6:9, which links together several background issues in the Hellenistic world. In modern terms, it refers not to simple cross dressing or transgender, but **#4. Feminisation.** Paul's Jewish contemporaries Philo and Josephus interpreted Leviticus 18 and 20 in light of the conspicuously common practice of grooming boys and adolescents as same-sex partners (Philo, *Laws* III.37-40, quoted below, discussing Lev 18:22; *On Abraham* 135-136; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.200). Youths were made, with long hair and soft skin and make-up, to look and act like women to appeal to older heterosexual men. This also gave *malakos* its connection with **#5. Prostitution**, although probably not temple prostitution. While that is an Old Testament issue (Deut 23:17; 1 Ki 14:24, 15:12, 22:46; 2 Ki 23:7, if the Hebrew *gedeshim* means temple prostitute), there is limited evidence for it in the NT period. A sixth reason is the **#6. Exploitation**, abuse and humiliation of men through same-sex intercourse (Scripture considers no female examples, though see Lucian's *Mimes of the Courtesans*, for a rare example in other literature.) This is the theme of Gen 19 and Jdg 19, where it constitutes a betrayal of social faith and order. Sexual abuse also characterized Greek and Roman treatment of slaves – which certainly sets a different complexion on slaves submitting to their masters, "not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh" (1 Pet 3:9). For a full background study, see Martti Nissinen's *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (1998).

**#7. Disease?** A seventh reason is alluded to in Rom 1:27, when Paul writes that men "received in their own person the due penalty for their error." (Or "amongst themselves", *en heautois* is ambiguous). Some kind of personal harm is in view, which must be plausibly a consequence of same-sex intercourse. There

are a number of possibilities here. These include captivity to sin as a judgement in itself (“one is punished by the very things by which one sins.” Wis 11:16). In Philo, the envisaged consequence appears to be a perceived loss of masculinity, and a reduction in offspring as a husband’s “seed” is sown on barren ground. I think it most likely, though, that Paul refers to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), even though their exact historical distribution is hard to establish. Such harm would be shared by promiscuous heterosexuals, but this doesn’t much affect the point, since Paul was certainly addressing promiscuous heterosexuals (see reason #3, above), whether or not he had anyone else in mind. This raises up the spectre of Christian responses to AIDS in the 1980s – would Paul have endorsed that, contra Matt 25’s care for the sick, or his own advice to “do good to all” (1 Thess 5:15), or to consider what it means for to lack love? However, since STDs are not an issue in faithful, monogamous relationships, they would not be a reason for seeing Evangelical same-sex marriages as immoral or abhorrent. Also, there remains an aspect of progressive corruption in Rom 1:27 which (see reason #2, above) is difficult to square with a same-sex marriage between people who were already same-sex oriented.

**#8. Compulsion.** Sexual compulsion and intemperance is also condemned in Rom 1:27, in which men became “consumed with passion” for one another. Temperance was emphasised by Jewish writers of the period as a point of commonality between the Jewish and the Greek and Roman emphases on discipline and self-control. This is noted especially by Philo, who links illicitness directly with obsessiveness in those pursuing same-sex intercourse (see the quote which follows below). But in practice, of course, same-sex marriages are no more prone to excess passion than heterosexual marriages are, and a high level of marital passion is not in any case considered problematic by Evangelicals, who have not generally inherited Platonic concerns that sexual passion is *hedonē*, wrong in itself and so redeemed only by procreative duties.

I have referred above to a contemporary of Paul’s named Philo, a philosophically trained Jewish man who lived in Alexandria. A short passage of his will help to show how these first eight concerns were understood by Jews in the first century. He has just reached Lev 18:22 in his discussion of the Jewish Laws:

*Philo, Laws III. (37) Moreover, another evil, much greater than that which we have already mentioned, has made its way among and been let loose upon cities, namely, the love of boys, which formerly was accounted a great infamy even to be spoken of, but which sin is a subject of boasting not only to those who practise it, but even to those who suffer it, and who, being accustomed to bearing the affliction of being treated like women, waste away as to both their souls and bodies, not bearing about them a single spark of a manly character to be kindled into a flame, but having even the hair of their heads conspicuously curled and adorned, and having their faces smeared with vermilion, and paint, and things of that kind, and having their eyes pencilled beneath, and having their skins anointed with fragrant perfumes (for in such persons as these a sweet smell is a most seductive quality), and being well appointed in everything that tends to beauty or elegance, are not ashamed to devote their constant study and endeavours to the task of changing their manly character into an effeminate one. (38) And it is natural for those who obey the law to consider such persons worthy of death, since the law commands that the man-woman who adulterates the precious coinage of his nature shall die without redemption, not allowing him to live a single day, or even a single hour, as he is a disgrace to himself, and to his family, and to his country, and to the whole race of mankind. (39) And let the man who is devoted to the love of boys submit to the*

same punishment, since he pursues that pleasure which is contrary to nature, and since, as far as depends upon him, he would make the cities desolate, and void, and empty of all inhabitants, wasting his power of propagating his species, and moreover, being a guide and teacher of those greatest of all evils, unmanliness and effeminate lust, stripping young men of the flower of their beauty, and wasting their prime of life in effeminacy, which he ought rather on the other hand to train to vigour and acts of courage; and last of all, because, like a worthless husbandman, he allows fertile and productive lands to lie fallow, contriving that they shall continue barren, and labours night and day at cultivating that soil from which he never expects any produce at all. (40) And I imagine that the cause of this is that among many nations there are actually rewards given for intemperance and effeminacy. At all events one may see men-women continually strutting through the market place at midday, and leading the processions in festivals...

In the 1980s Robin Scroggs argued that Paul mainly referred to pederasty in his condemnations, and supplied an eye-opening catalogue of how pederasty was accepted unembarrassedly, and even advocated as a moral good, a kind of mentoring, in Greek and Roman society. He noted too how it was morally opposed by others, and how Hellenistic Jews joined the counter-argument against it, as we saw in Philo. However, Paul in Romans 1, by writing “males with males” (*arsenes*, v.27), and by discussing women too, establishes that he is not primarily addressing pederasty in the way that Philo is. Philo and Josephus simply help us to see what first century Jews saw when they looked at Greco-Roman homosexuality; and what they saw touched in one way or another on all eight of these reasons for its condemnation.

These first eight reasons have included self-evident evil and harm in such cases as promiscuity and adultery, prostitution, rape and exploitation (including pederasty), disease transmission, compulsive sexual behaviours, a progressive corruption of heterosexual desire that entrenches these outcomes, and the connection of such practices with idolatrous worship and its other consequences. Collectively, these issues more than justify the sense of almost visceral abhorrence that underlies the biblical taboos and condemnations. These were key issues in the biblical time-periods, and for much of our history, and they apply to quite a number of analogous contemporary cases. Significantly though, not a single one of these reasons applies to a same-sex marriage of two same-sex oriented people. That case must be made from the four which remain.

### Four biblical reasons that *seem* to apply

Four biblical reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse appear to apply to the combined case of same-sex orientation and marriage. These are that same-sex intercourse is contrary to nature, that it causes social harm, that it transgresses a heterosexual purpose (or norm, or pattern, or ideal) that benefits humanity, and that it is morally abhorrent. This last point is more often stated than explained, but may be thought to be based on these other reasons. You will recognise the first three arguments from recent advocacy against marriage equality. This pattern in our advocacy is perhaps an acknowledgement that the first eight reasons do not apply – otherwise, why not use some of them to argue publicly that same-sex marriage is immoral? Do these four then apply?

**#9. Nature.** Continuing my numbering, the ninth of the biblical reasons is the judgement of unnaturalness that we find in Rom 1:26-27 (and Jude 1:7, though that depends on how ‘strange flesh’ is understood). Some of the earlier eight reasons warranted the term “unnatural” as an expression of moral dis-

gust: they included the corruption of heterosexual desire, the exploitation of youths for the pleasure of others, and the risk of disease. But what about the case of same-sex marriages between two people who have always been same-sex oriented? Is that “unnatural” in Paul’s terms? Minimally, we must say that women “*exchanging* natural intercourse for unnatural” and men “*giving up* the natural use of the woman” (literal translation) means for Paul a perversion or corruption of naturally heterosexual desire, as well as fidelity to marriage. As already noted, this does not occur when people who have always been same-sex oriented get same-sex married. However, there may be more dimensions to this judgement of unnaturalness.

Evangelicals normally understand Paul’s appeal to nature in light of Gen 2-3, by way of Matt 19, so that ‘nature’ means the original or the ideal form of God’s creation. But in the clearest case in which we find Paul arguing from nature, he undermines that view by asking, “does not *nature itself* teach you that if a man has long hair it is a disgrace to him?” (1 Cor 11:7, *emph. added*). Few Evangelicals today would say that nature has taught them anything of the sort, despite observing that this is a rhetorical question expecting the answer yes. I will comment further on this passage, but for now we can simply note that what could be “unnatural” and even disgraceful for Greeks and Romans is not automatically immoral for us in consequence.

Does Rom 1:27 mean “contrary to a created purpose, pattern or ideal” when it says “unnatural”? There is no connection made in Rom 1 itself. It is from “the creation” (v.20) that God’s eternal power and divine nature have been seen “through what is made,” and then rejected. However, nothing here suggests that the judgement ‘unnatural’ in vv.26-27 works in a similar way, say by arguing for the natural revelation of morals. There seem to be only two ways that nature could connect with immorality and abhorrence in this passage: If “nature” describes an harmoniously ordered social system, the “sexual ecology” of some recent writing, then what is “natural” is well-being, and the judgement “unnatural” means individual or social harm arising in the case of same-sex relations (reason #10, below). And if nature means a created pattern or divine ideal for human life, then what is “natural” is conformity to one’s design or purpose, and what is “unnatural” is the contravention of a biblical, created ideal of marriage (reason #11, below). The argument from nature, if it has validity, must then derive it from one or both of two reasons that I have listed separately:

**#10. Social Harm.** Evangelicals have argued that same-sex marriage will cause damage the fabric of society, and so affect human well-being, most especially that of children. This is the most tenuous claim to establish biblically, not that anyone really tries. Since causing harm is typically morally wrong in itself, a demonstration of direct harm coming from same-sex marriages would suffice to support a moral argument. Biblically, though, it is perhaps implicit in the decision to use abusive forms of same-sex intercourse to exemplify societal failure in Gen 19 and Jdg 19, or to use its Hellenistic forms as the signature offence of that culture in Rom 1. Linkage with many of the first eight reasons above would support the claim of social harm, but as we have seen, they do not apply to the case of same-sex marriage between same-sex oriented people. So this is not strictly a biblical argument about same-sex marriage or orientation; it just comes down to demonstrating harmfulness (though of course, “Love does no harm to a neighbour,” Rom 13:10).

Recent advocacy against same-sex marriage has been focused more on the plausibility of harm than on the demonstration that it has occurred. In Australia, the study by Benson *et al*, *Redefining Marriage*, is one suitable illustration of this trend. Yet there are countries in which same-sex marriage has been legal for eight or ten years by now, and it is not hard to find and speak to young adults who have been raised by same-sex couples. Serious and systematic harm ought to be visible in social statistics already, yet Evangelicals have not produced dis-

turbing figures from those countries, or families. The argument that a child “does best” with a mother and a father is plausible enough, but are we saying that the children of same-sex parents will do so badly as to make those unions immoral in God’s eyes? Exactly how much harm are we predicting? Would it be better or worse than single parenting, for example? In single parenting, a child has one gender model and one care-giver. In same-sex parenting the number of care-givers increases to two, and in a heterosexual family, the number of gender models also increases to two. If there are detriments to having fewer than two gender models, and less than two care-givers, then that should place same-sex parenting somewhere in between heterosexual parenting and single parenting in terms of outcomes. That is to say, it ought to fall well within socially accepted bounds, and nowhere near levels of risk that would be automatically immoral. If we knew that same-sex marriages caused harm, we could see them as morally suspect. And if we knew they were morally suspect, we might expect them to cause harm. But one point or the other has to be established first, not each one based upon the other in tight circularity. Without this being done, there seems no basis for condemning same-sex marriages as social risks so serious as to be obviously immoral, or seeing them as breaches of a good society’s duty of care for children. So the argument from social harm has not, so far as I have seen, been made.

**#11. God’s Created Pattern.** Evangelicals argue that there is a divine ideal or pattern of marriage that is a general condition for human well-being, and that this is exclusively heterosexual. Or, applied specifically to Christians, this can be framed as a representation of divine order, to which we ought to be committed, and which we honour God by honouring. The question of whether a same-sex marriage is something that *God* would view as marriage will be considered under my third major heading (see below). For now I want to ask if the existence of a good, divine, and perfect heterosexual ideal of marriages, with no other supporting arguments, shows us that same-sex marriages are immoral. In asking this question we straight-away face the problem that a generally good ideal is not the same thing as a moral obligation; if it were we would call it a command or requirement, not just an ideal or pattern. To say that heterosexual marriage represents even a perfect and divine ideal does not preclude any number of sensible or even merely situational exceptions, of which scripture itself presents a catalogue. These include celibacy (Jesus, Paul, Paul’s recommendations), Moses’ divorce laws (Deut 24:1, rejected by Jesus in Matt 19), those who are “eunuchs from birth” (asexuals? Matt 19:12), or of course polygamy under the Jewish law (Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon), among other cases. There appear to have been sensible and situational reasons for these exceptions (and other, stranger ones, like Levirate marriage), and whether same-sex marriage is a reasonable exception of this kind will be considered presently (below). For now this raft of biblical exceptions to the norm suffices to show that simply having a natural, divine, and even perfect ideal of marriage does not automatically imply a moral condemnation for those who don’t or can’t conform to it. Nor does it support the idea that having sensible exceptions for a very small minority must undermine the general ideal for an overwhelmingly heterosexual population.

**#12. Moral Disgust.** The twelfth biblical reason for condemning same-sex intercourse is moral abhorrence and disgust. Not that “it’s dirty” in some general way that we can’t talk about, but rather that it is specifically immoral, so that a moral person ought be disgusted by it, and legitimately shamed and degraded by participation in it, and so should respond with principled revulsion. Evangelicals have had a very ambiguous relationship with this condemnation, which will require some unpacking. What exactly is this disgust? Is there a right form of disgust to have toward a same-sex intercourse, attraction, orientation, and marriage?

It's very clear that same-sex intercourse is being condemned as both immoral and abhorrent in scripture; I don't need to repeat all the reasons already discussed above. This, I would say, is what primarily prevents Evangelicals from ever backing off on this issue: God really hates the subject of those condemnations. No-one, I think, can read scripture in a consistently Evangelical way while denying that. A great deal of 'affirming' writing has tried to skirt around this in various ways, some already described above, and so has simply failed to offer an Evangelical position on same-sex issues. But it's equally clear that Paul in particular addressed *same-sex desires themselves* as shameful (also as discussed above), and that creates difficulties, because Evangelicals have frequently understood "orientation" simply as temptation, something absolutely everyone experiences, and not something that is intrinsically shameful.

When Evangelicals have argued publicly against same-sex marriage, we have usually been careful to distinguish ourselves from simple prejudice and hate speech, of the kind expressed by socially insular groups that we would ordinarily describe as fundamentalist. Evangelicals perceive themselves to be objecting on the basis of principle rather than prejudice, because of love rather than hate, and acting in the ultimate best interests of same-sex attracted people. Yet scripture shows no reticence in saying same-sex intercourse is abhorrent, shameful, damnable, and much more. Can this be publicly defended or is it being selectively soft-pedalled? Isn't it the case that moral evils *ought* to be abhorrent to moral people? Isn't that what having moral sensibility means? If it seems difficult to justify abhorrence toward that same-sex couple next door, and if we feel compelled in Christ to offer compassion and empathy where scripture offers none, then don't we need to ask ourselves: Are we and scripture even talking about the same thing? I have argued, above, that Paul's condemnations applied perfectly to the prevailing forms of homosexuality in Greek and Roman culture: that it answered to all the reasons scripture offers for condemning same-sex intercourse. However, it is perfectly clear from the text of Romans 1 that Paul is not addressing anything resembling orientation, and that when we address this biblically, we find that its condemnations don't apply. As Evangelicals, we will be most consistent, and most faithful, if we agree with what scripture condemns, but do not try and make it condemn what and whom it does not.

## Conclusions, objections and implications

We have by now considered twelve biblical reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse, and whether they apply to the case of a same-sex marriage between two same-sex oriented people. Eight of these reasons addressed self-evident evil and harm in such cases as prostitution, promiscuity, adultery, rape and exploitation (which would include pederasty), disease transmission, compulsive sexual behaviours, a progressive corruption of heterosexual desire that entrenches these outcomes, and a consequential connection with false worship. These reasons, though, were clearly not applicable to same-sex marriages, which I think is why Evangelicals do not use them in public argument. The other four, which have certainly seemed to apply, have not held up under examination: Morally significant harm has not been demonstrated, biblically or practically. Arguments from "nature" are ambiguous, unless they mean only perversion of desire, which for Paul they minimally do, in which case they are inapplicable to the case of orientation. A perfect divine ideal is not the same thing as a universal moral obligation, and does not preclude reasonable exceptions, of which scripture gives us several examples in the case of marriage itself. Disgust presupposes *moral* abhorrence, which is to say, it needs at least some of the first eleven reasons to support it, and none do. These last four reasons certainly appear in scripture *as if they were* moral condemnations, but when they did they supported and complemented the other, obvious moral condemnations. They were never asked

to stand alone as we have asked them to. Anything matching those first eight condemnations will be reasonably called unnatural (reason #9), will be socially harmful (#10), will violate heterosexual norms of marriage (#11), and so will be morally abhorrent (#12) in a way that could be shown to anyone and they could be expected to acknowledge. It is easy, then, to see why Paul thought that gentiles would know that these things were wrong, and why, on the other hand, same-sex marriages in contemporary life have not been seen as self-evidently immoral in the way that Evangelicals feel they should have been. And equally, this shows us why Evangelicals have not publicly argued that same-sex marriage is an immoral thing, an evil, but have rather sought ways to support and vindicate the seemingly applicable arguments from nature, from God's ideal of marriage, and from expected harm.

It will by now be clear why Paul could say that some in his Corinthian congregation had changed, in Christ, from being men who slept with other men (*arsenokoitēs*, 1 Cor 6:9), and why, in contrast to our pastoral experience, he thought that this change fitted in a list of more-or-less straightforward matters of decision – turning from fornication, idolatry, adultery, prostitution, theft, greed, and drunkenness. Simply enough, the great majority of Greeks and Romans who were involved in same-sex intercourse were married heterosexuals. Correspondingly, it will be clear why modern Evangelicals have had such limited success with “ex-gay” therapies: The great majority of those participating were same-sex oriented. Paul was addressing *precisely* what modern Evangelicals would call a “lifestyle choice.” As his own statements have emphasised (see above), he was not talking about orientation. When we do address same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage together, as we must, we find that the reasons for which he condemned same-sex intercourse – though they made all the sense in the ancient world – simply don't condemn same-sex relationships of this kind.

MY CONCLUSION, then, is that same-sex marriage between same-sex oriented Evangelicals, and same-sex intercourse in that context, is not morally condemned *in any way at all* by scripture. Some special complications arise from the inability of same-sex couples to have children by natural means, and of course from social prejudices, but these are practical and not moral issues.

What does it mean for Evangelical theology, if this is correct? Taking it as given that scripture is God's revelation of his person and character, then the absence of any moral condemnation in scripture should be taken to mean that God would not see such a union as immoral, evil, or detestable. On the evidence of scripture, *God* does not think same-sex marriages are morally wrong. That is a striking conclusion, which cancels out one of our basic premises in moral and sexual theology, in pastoral care, and in social engagement.

For Evangelicals, I think there will be four lingering concerns about this conclusion. In their popular forms: (1) Doesn't this contradict the *plain sense* of scripture? (2) Am I saying that God has somehow changed his mind about sin? (or “How could this *suddenly* be OK?”) (3) Why has no-one in church history *ever* held this position? and (4) Isn't this just an *obvious* matter of conscience? There are political and social objections too, but I will consider them when I ask the next important question: “Does God think a same-sex marriage is really a marriage?” (below).

The plain sense of scripture is, I think, the foundational Evangelical concern. Arguments for same-sex marriage have often argued that scripture is complex and unclear about the moral status of same-sex intercourse, which has been enormously unpersuasive to Evangelicals, especially in regard to Romans. There are plenty of historical and cultural complexities to be considered, but still: same-sex intercourse (considered without reference to orientation) is condemned in the strongest terms, and without any contemplation of exceptions, and in ways that make the prohibition clearly universal by locating it in God's character,

framed as a fundamental moral issue rather than a cultural or religious concern that can be separated from morality. So it doesn't seem at all unusual that Christians should see this as a classic "matter of biblical authority," especially post-sexual-revolution.

But when we consider same-sex marriage and same-sex orientation together, taking scripture *precisely* at face value, these moral objections do not apply to it. It is not biblically condemned as immoral. Whether this controverts the "plain sense" of scripture depends, I think, on whether we are really asking "Does Paul condemn every case of same-sex intercourse of which he is aware?" Clearly he does. But as soon as we ask about same-sex marriage, it becomes equally clear that Paul, and scripture generally, does not address it, and then, that the reasons that scripture uses to condemn same-sex intercourse do not apply to it. If you can show that they do, then I want to hear from you.

It would be inconsistent to argue that God, who is eternal and omniscient, would suddenly experience a wholesale change in his moral judgements. The reason why this apparent 'change' is biblical is that it is not a change at all. Rather, we are answering a question that we do not seem to have considered previously. Evangelicals have understood same-sex marriage and sometimes also same-sex orientation to be impossibilities, and so, have never put these two questions to scripture together. It is not that anything has changed in God, scripture or morals. It is that we are "suddenly" addressing a different question. That's how same-sex marriages could "suddenly" be OK. The main reason we are addressing these together questions now, on which I will say more (below), is that same-sex orientation and marriage has become a live social option now in way that it was not in antiquity, nor has been for most of our history.

Both the plain sense of scripture and the unchanging nature of God argue against relativising of the biblical prohibitions, something which I think many arguments for same-sex marriage have done. If I am doing that anywhere in this paper, I would appreciate it being pointed out so it can be corrected.

Should we then be concerned about a lack of historical precedent, or whether conscience can trump an argument from scripture itself? Apart from insisting on the importance of freedom of conscience, neither point has much to commend itself against a biblical argument. For Evangelicals, conscience and moral feeling are subordinate to reason and revelation. And, however much humility means learning from our predecessors, neither historical, nor institutional, nor traditional precedents carry any weight whatsoever when set against biblical argument. Baptist tradition in particular has recognized this anti-traditionalism by being, in John Robinson's famous phrase, "verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word."

What does it mean for us, then, if scripture does not condemn same-sex marriage? It means a u-turn in our moral thinking. Virtually all Evangelical advocacy on this subject has been built upon a *prima facie* understanding that the biblical condemnations apply to all same-sex relations. Evangelical concerns that same-sex marriage would be "normalised" have usually presupposed that this would normalise immorality. Our political activism has been built on the conviction that social immorality must be opposed and here is where we have to draw the line. Our appeals to freedom of religion have been based on freedom of conscience, that each person must be free to do what they see as morally right in God's eyes. Our pursuit of reparative therapy has been morally required by the absence of any other moral alternative to celibacy. Even our consciences and moral sensibilities, the things we find appealing or revolting, have been formed by these understandings, and by church communities that were also formed by them. But if the biblical condemnations do not apply in this case, then every one of these concerns have to be re-evaluated, and rebuilt, from the roots up.

However, without asking one more question, much of this remains quite

hypothetical. It is one thing to show that God does not think same-sex marriages are morally wrong. It is step further to show that he recognizes and celebrates these unions as marriages. Would God object to same-sex marriages for other moral reasons that those we have discussed? Would he object for reasons that were not moral in nature? Would he not object at all? If same-sex intercourse is fine provided those involved are married, then is it thus, for Evangelicals, the same as heterosexual intercourse? This is our final major question.

## Does God think same-sex marriages are really marriages?

Evangelical approaches to same-sex marriage have uniformly understood that same-sex intercourse would be biblically immoral this situation.

... a “same-sex” marriage is an oxymoron; since scripture universally condemns homosexual relationships, God would never sanction a sacred marital bond between two members of the same-sex. (Köstenberger, p.77)

This quote, as an aside, illustrates the slipperiness of some Evangelical writing. Scripture, of course, doesn’t refer to “homosexuals” as the term is generally used now, that is, it doesn’t refer to same-sex *oriented* people (see part 1 of this paper). And, of course, it does not consider “relationships” in that connection, but rather speaks about attraction and intercourse.

But setting these problems aside, Köstenberger correctly identifies the primary question for Christian life and thought regarding same-sex marriages. Is a same-sex union, though neither heterosexual, nor comprised of two genders, nor by natural means procreative, nonetheless a marriage in God’s eyes? If it is not, the fact that scripture does not condemn this case (see above) is largely irrelevant for Christian life and practice. If, on the other hand, God does see these as marriages, then Evangelical churches should perform and celebrate and recognize them – and may do so irrespective of what civil laws allow.

As we have seen above, while scripture gives a dozen reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse, these reasons don’t condemn the case that matters most, that of a same-sex marriage for a same-sex oriented couple. That means we have no basis for seeing same-sex intercourse as biblically immoral in this situation (see part 2, above.) What does this mean for marriage? If two same-sex oriented Evangelicals undertake an otherwise normal Christian marriage, with the same convictions and commitments as anyone else, then do we say, as the Anglican Order of Service reads, “what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:6). Or is that passage itself insurmountable, because “the one who made them at the beginning made them male and female, therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (Matt 19:4-5, cf. Gen 2:24, Eph 5:31).

If a person constitutionally lacks heterosexual attraction, then they are already outside of any biblical, heterosexual ideal of marital love and intimacy. Some who are same-sex attracted appear to have the capacity for heterosexual love, even in the absence of sexual attraction to the opposite sex. Others do not. This is why it is irrelevant and self-marginalising for the Evangelical media to publish the occasional and isolated testimony of someone who (usually) “lived a gay lifestyle”, but then became happily married. Nobody doubts that this happens. The question is rather whether *everybody*, given Christianity’s completely universal claims, can do so, which no study, by Evangelicals or anybody else, has shown (on this, see the accompanying paper, *Evangelical Churches and*

Same-Sex Orientation<sup>12</sup>). We simply have no way to shoehorn every person into what, for most people, is the naturally good ideal. Yet it remains true that, “it is not good that the man [or woman] should be alone” (Gen 2:18). We are created for relationships; this, on most understandings, is what it means to be made in God’s image; this is why the NT, which can affirm singleness for some, can still remain opposed to anyone “forbidding to marry” (1 Tim 4:3).

What then is a marriage, and can a same-sex marriage be a genuine marriage in God’s eyes? Evangelicals correctly understand the biblical ideal of marriage as a lifelong heterosexual union of faithfulness, monogamy and sexual and romantic intimacy, amongst other qualities. This naturally complements forming families and raising children, and should be regarded as a universal ideal wherever it is possible. Of course, God in the Old Testament endorsed some obvious violations of this pattern. Moses’ laws of divorce violated the requirement of lifelong faithfulness, while patriarchal, monarchic and other polygamy, amongst other practices, violated the requirement of monogamy. But Scripture emphasises this ideal in part by moving away from those practices, and explicitly marginalising them. Thus Jesus rejected Moses’ divorce laws in Matthew 19:8, and neither Abraham, David, nor Moses (probably, see Num 12) could have served as deacons in a Pauline house church, not having the requisite “one wife” (1 Tim 3:12). These exceptions show that Scripture moves towards an ideal, not that it lacks one. Significantly, though, those marriages which were polygamous, or which followed Mosaic divorces, were still regarded by God as true marriages, even though they were not the ideal. This suggests what we might otherwise expect, that reasonable exceptions do not undermine an ideal but, precisely by being both reasonable and exceptional, actually reinforce it as the general norm.

Same-sex marriages show both similarities and differences with heterosexual marriages, and the biblical ideal in particular. The similarities are obvious and not especially controversial. A same-sex marriage between same-sex oriented Evangelicals would be intended as, and would most likely be, a lifelong union of sexual and romantic intimacy, of care and companionship, of faithful monogamy, and the possibility of raising a family. That is to say, this would fulfil every aspect of the biblical ideal that is actually possible in the permanent absence of heterosexual attraction. For a same-sex oriented person, the alternatives of lifelong celibacy or half-heterosexual marriage only sacrifice other aspects of that purpose, pattern and ideal, such as lifelong care and companionship, or sexual and romantic intimacy. In the absence of biblical and moral condemnations, it becomes significant that same-sex marriages offer a better experience of life for same-sex oriented people than either of those alternatives.

Evangelicals do not contest that same-sex marriages share these positive qualities with heterosexual marriages; the issue is rather their differences. Because there are aspects of the biblical ideal which same-sex marriages lack, we must ask if these undermine or negate the aspects of biblical marriages which they fulfil, or the nature of marriage as a whole. It would also be worth considering if same-sex marriages have benefits or advantages which heterosexual unions do not. And finally, we will need to ask why, if this is actually a good and godly thing, it was not practised in biblical times, when we may suppose that same-sex oriented people also existed in much the same ratio as today? If it were really viable, wouldn’t that have been more sensible than taking on half-heterosexual marriages? Köstenberger offers a suitable summary of the differences that Evangelicals note between heterosexual and same-sex marriage (enumeration added):

From creation it also becomes clear that heterosexuality, rather than homosexuality, is [1] God’s pattern for men and women. The sexes are created in [2] distinctness, which must not be obliterated, and

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<sup>12</sup>[http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation\\_20140906.html](http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation_20140906.html)

humanity exists as male and female for the purpose of [2.a] complementarity and [2.b] procreation, neither of which can be properly realised in same-sex sexual relationships. Moreover, [3] the divine image was seen to be imprinted on man *as male and female*, so that homosexual unions fall short of reflecting God's own likeness as unity in diversity (p.272).

The first of these points has already been discussed (see reason #9): It sounds compelling, of course, to say that "this is GOD'S pattern for men and women," until it has to be noted that nothing about a perfect or divine pattern, plan, ideal or design precludes reasonable exceptions, and that in scripture there are already numerous exceptions to the ideal of marriage in particular. Some exceptions are historical (Mosaic divorce; patriarchal and other polygamy) and some have continuing relevance in western society (singleness where gifted or where otherwise preferable), so that there is no reasonable way to claim that "God's pattern" generates a universal obligation, even in scripture. Since a person constitutionally lacking heterosexual attraction, either sexual or romantic, is already outside of the ideal, it would be strange if same-sex orientation presented or required anything other than an exception to the general ideal.

Köstenberger's second point is the most important. Here he seeks to explain the importance of male and female differences in marriage, as complementarity and procreation. Of these, complementarity is the primary point, since procreation is now just as accessible to same-sex couples as it is to infertile heterosexual couples. While there are some ethical hurdles in each case, they are no more insurmountable in one case than the other, and, if there is no ethical barrier to same-sex marriage, they could be equally resolved by adoption in either case. But mentioning adoption leads us to the Evangelical concerns that focus on complementarity, which are relationships and parenting. These questions are usually framed by the question of "unnaturalness" or by arguments for inferior quality. I have already discussed these (Section 2, reasons #9 and #10) in reference to the question of immorality, and found no obvious case for judging either the relationships or the parenting to be immoral. And there seems to be no sustainable argument from social disadvantage, other than that attributable to the prejudices which a same-sex couple or family may still face.

Köstenberger's third argument, that the image of God is substantially represented in sexual distinctions, is baseless. The relevant passages are Gen 1:26-27 (God's image means dominion over the rest of the created world); 5:1,3 (God's image is inherited by children); 9:6 (violence against humans made in God's image will be avenged); 1 Cor 11:7 (God's image in men and women is sort-of-linked with women wearing head coverings in church meetings); Col 3:10 (you are being remade into God's image, so live like it) and James 3:9 (humans made in God's image deserve honour not cursing). Only Gen 1:27 and 1 Cor 11:7 mention both God's image and human gender. In Genesis both men and women are made in God's image. This precedes an instruction to multiply (vv.28-30), but does not seem to see God's act of creation mirrored in human procreation; rather, vv.26-30 sets multiplication in the context of "having dominion" over the whole earth. In 1 Corinthians, in a spirited defence of head covering in early Christian gatherings, Paul appears to oppose certain women making a public statement of their independence from men (11:11) by going publicly unveiled. The 'veil' was the Roman *palla*, something we might call a mantle, which was conferred at one's wedding, and which could only be worn by married women in good standing in society (see esp. Bruce N. Winter: *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, pp.77ff). Paul's statement that men were made in God's image, then women in men's image, is usually read by Evangelicals as a way of chastising any asserted independence of women from men, and never as rejecting the idea that both are *equally* made in God's image. What is profoundly absent from

all these passages is the statement that Köstenberger wants to draw from them: that sexual distinction is a key aspect of God's image in humanity. Thus Carl F. Henry's three-page article, 'Image of God' in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* feels no need to even once refer to this supposedly foundational idea, and on the contrary denies that "distinctions within the image" are suggested anywhere (for diversity in unity, of course, the church as the body of Christ is the perfect picture – but then what of the same-sex oriented members?). Rather, being God's image means we represent him in a way that idolatrous "images" never can, and so we honour God by honouring his images, which are human beings. This also captures well that we are different in kind to God, in fact a wholly different and dependent order of being; a reflection. Yet all this adds precisely nothing to our discussion of what God sees a marriage to be.

There seems to be no substantial argument here; just a series of attempts to find solid ground for the biblical judgement of immorality that we have already considered and found inapplicable. None of these arguments based on differences between heterosexual and same-sex marriage have shown a problem that would undermine or nullify their similarities. Both marriage as God's purpose and pattern for humanity and marriage as a reflection of complementarity reduce to cases already considered: purpose and nature, respectively. A generally good, even a perfect and divine ideal, does not preclude reasonable exceptions in scripture, nor does the general good of complementarity seem undermined by people who are constitutionally outside that ideal, Nor does misinterpreting the Image of God in terms of sexual difference help us pretend that it does.

If none of these arguments actually work – neither that same-sex marriage is immoral, nor that it is practically or theologically inferior to heterosexual marriage – then is there any biblical foundation for opposing same-sex marriages, whether in society or in the church itself? None remains. Can we then say positively that God views these marriages as marriages? If scripture is the sole authority by which that would be judged, then yes. No moral condemnation in scripture applies to them. Their commonalities with heterosexual marriage match his ideal. They represent every aspect of marriage that can be fulfilled in the permanent absence of heterosexual attraction. And their differences, which exist through no fault of the individuals concerned, do not undermine any aspect of that ideal. An existing biblical category contains exceptions to the ideal of marriage that were nonetheless marriages in God's sight. A group of people who constitutionally lack heterosexual attraction are an obviously exceptional case. A same-sex marriage doesn't violate monogamy or life-long faithfulness, as certain biblical exceptions did, and should therefore be seen as obviously superior to these. As they were seen by God as marriages, then so is this. These marriages should therefore be commended to same-sex oriented Evangelicals, and practised in Evangelical churches. I should only add that, since this argument is based on biblical principle, it is immune to the concern that supporting same-sex marriage means giving up on biblical principle.

One question remains, though, as an appendix. Why doesn't same-sex marriage appear in scripture? If same-sex marriage is not condemned by the biblical condemnations of same-sex intercourse, and so is morally acceptable and even pastorally desirable now, then why not in the past? Surely there were same-sex oriented people living in biblical times? Surely their situation was the same?

Actually no, their situation was very different, just as that of heterosexuals was very different. We would not now suggest that someone lacking heterosexual attraction undertake a heterosexual marriage, but in either biblical time period that was hardly negotiable. In those societies, there was no other plan than families for offsetting low life expectancy, keeping up the population in case of war, or providing social security in old age, so that all social honour was built upon these necessities, and heterosexual marriage was as close as makes no difference to an obligation (see reason #3, above). There was no other way

to procreate than by heterosexual union. It was only in comparatively recent times that much of this has changed, and far more broadly than just in the implications for social security. Marriage has gained a universal expectation of romance and intimacy, to say nothing of mutuality, which corresponds to Evangelical understandings of the biblical ideal. These qualities, which we see as central to the biblical ideal of marriage, are now better expressed in secular society than they ever were in Old or New Testament times, even if, for other reasons, they are also more prone to divorce. Also, over the past fifty years, orientation has come to be much better understood. It is now so markedly distinguished from the problems graphically condemned by Paul that same-sex marriages fail to match any of his condemnations. This perhaps explains why orientation has proven so resistant to ‘reparative therapies’ of every kind, and why it doesn’t fit a normal, common-sense Evangelical understanding of sin and repentance. It’s not a temptation any more or less than heterosexual attraction is a temptation, because, as we have seen, sex in a same-sex marriage isn’t a sin, any more than sex in heterosexual marriage is. If that statement seems a little jarring, remember again that it has by now been justified by biblical argument, with all this implies for Evangelical life and thought.

In the absence of a moral condemnation out of scripture, same-sex marriages for Evangelicals have only to be judged against the biblical ideal of marriage. A same-sex marriage fulfils every part of that ideal that is possible in the absence of heterosexual attraction: they constitute a lifelong union of sexual and romantic intimacy, of care and companionship, of faithful monogamy, and where possible raising a family. The differences which exist do not undermine or negate the commonalities, and the benefits of marriage positively commend it over the alternatives of lifelong celibacy or half-heterosexual marriage. It follows straightforwardly that Evangelical churches ought to encourage same-sex oriented Christians to pursue same-sex marriages, and should support and celebrate those unions just as much as any other. They should regard those marriages as morally no different to heterosexual marriages. They should not them as even practically very different, except for some of the extra complexities and challenges that go with having children. And even then, as is the case with single parenting, the best way to offset those challenges will be in the safe and supporting community of a church. What then should that look like?

## Conclusions for Evangelical life and community

If the understanding presented in this paper is sound, there is no biblical argument against same-sex marriage, whether in society or in the Evangelical church itself. When I have now and then been asked to speak on this subject, I have sometimes begun by asking for a show of hands: *How many present think this argument is even possible?* – A handful at most, regardless of denominational background. From almost every angle, this conclusion is supposed to be impossible. I think that’s why the questions leading here have not been properly considered.

In my view, this conclusion resolves a raft of Evangelical concerns and problems which have been apparent for some time but which have remained unresolved and have seemed unresolvable, leaving us weary and wary of the questions. There are plenty of us who see same-sex orientation as a simple fact of life for a certain percentage of the population. Who see no notable success but rather harm coming from most efforts to change it, and more still arising from lifelong celibacy, half-heterosexual marriages, or loss of faith – but who still see no way they could affirm a same-sex marriage on Evangelical grounds. Who are sure

that ever acting upon same-sex orientation must be addressed by the biblical prohibitions, so that same-sex intercourse could never be affirmed as morally good. Who see no way past “unnatural” in Rom 1, or “abominable” in Lev 18. And who are sure, of course, that the biblical ideal of marriage is purely heterosexual.

All of these concerns may now be considered resolved. It is as if we have had a ball of knotted strings to untangle, strings which are rather valuable and useful in themselves, but not, of course, in that condition. Some of the solutions we have seen have been like chopping it up with an axe, or hiding it in a cupboard. But when we pull upon the strings marked ‘orientation’ and ‘marriage’, together, then every last knot pulls free, and the tangle perfectly unsnarls. If same-sex marriages are seen by God as moral and as true marriages, then no conflict of any kind remains between Evangelical theology, or community life, and same-sex orientation. As a new idea, this can be more than mildly disorienting.

I think it takes a person six months to come to terms with this argument. That’s even if they are persuaded up-front by the biblical claims, and they know same-sex oriented people with whom they have or can talk, and develop some trust, understanding and empathy. Instinctive reactions, especially the sense of abhorrent taboo, can be deeply ingrained. These are tied to strong emotions, and equated with authentic faith and urgent political need. A person forty years of age may have spent 13,000 days holding and reinforcing the opposite view, and the emotions, convictions and concerns they have gained will not disappear overnight, even if they are now recognized to be unwarranted. That is the primary reason why I never ask any person to publicly support this position.

Many pastors in NSW, with a mortgage and a family, could quickly be sacked by their congregations or disciplined by their denominations for agreeing with this paper, completely regardless of whether this argument is biblically sound. There has been no viable “Let’s have a discussion about this” position, because part of the established view is that there is nothing to discuss, and that efforts to do so are simply rationalisations of political and theological compromise, so that even the question is wrong. As a result, it has been easier for me to write this paper than it would have been for many others. While I have some relevant qualifications, my church and church planting involvements have never been my career. I work in IT, I paid for my own theological education, I don’t live in church housing, and I have no ministry credentials that could be revoked – nor would it matter if I did. Others, though, will want to be sure what they think before putting their job on the line. What churches need to see is a fully-formed and wholly Evangelical alternative. And even then, they might in many cases fire first and ask questions later. It simply won’t seem possible that we have been completely, confidently and collectively wrong on this issue. To make their argument, this paper and its companion<sup>13</sup> have had to dismantle about a dozen closely interlocking misconceptions about scripture, orientation, and same-sex marriage, all of which support and reinforce each other. It has had to change the whole paradigm. If the argument is correct, then it follows that the Evangelical sense of impregnable certainty on this issue is nothing more than the sum of those misconceptions, which is to say, an illusion in God’s eyes. Still, there are many conscientious reasons for holding to this position when its problems have not been realised, or its human dimension is buried by politics, or when there seems to be no viable Evangelical alternative. In writing this paper, I hope to have provided a viable and actually superior Evangelical position.

This would require, to put it mildly, a change of direction. If same-sex marriages are in fact acceptable to God, they may and should be celebrated with joy in Evangelical churches. It would follow that we owe a large number of people a substantial apology. There would now be no biblical or theological need

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<sup>13</sup>[http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation\\_20140906.html](http://180.org.au/evangelical-churches-and-same-sex-orientation_20140906.html)

to deny that same-sex orientation exists as actually described by our neighbours. No need to maintain a kind of pastoral paralysis or public silence in the name of the gospel, nor to prescribe generally ineffective therapies or lifelong celibacy in the name of discipleship, nor take up double-speak like “sexual brokenness” to rationalise them. No need to exclude same-sex relationships from church in the name of biblical faithfulness, nor to trivialise and malign same-sex romance or parenting in the name of family, nor to exclude married gay couples from church membership or ministry in the name of obedience. The acceptability of same-sex marriage means that same-sex orientation no longer drives a wedge between God’s love and holiness, nor ours. We can forget once and for all about being “affirming”, or “inclusive”, or “welcoming” (all with reservations), and rather be equal, celebrated, and loved. This language has often been used as a basis for rationalizing scripture, but where, as here, it is the direct implication of reading scripture, it should be accepted as such.

This also resolves the key political and social problems that we have encountered on the subject of same-sex orientation. There is now no need to seek exceptional “religious liberty” exemptions from discrimination laws for Evangelical views, because we have no longer any conscientious need to hold different standards for same-sex oriented people. We can now publicly answer the question: What is so immoral and abhorrent about that same-sex couple next door? While there may be things that are immoral and abhorrent in any relationship, being a married same-sex couple is not one of them. In the general case we would say there is *nothing* wrong, just as we would say for a heterosexual couple. If a same-sex oriented person grew up in church, then they could fall in love and marry without complications. If they were married already, with or without a family, then they could come to faith without complications. (On these and other practical problems, see the accompanying paper, *Some Practical Scenarios for Discussion*<sup>14</sup>.)

Of course, if opposition to same-sex marriage, or intercourse, or even orientation, were a consequence of faithfulness to scripture and to God, then we should say so be it, and that this is not a popularity contest. We would still have a raft of practical and theological problems to solve in one way or another, but we would be acting with consistency as we got on with that. But if the argument of this paper is correct, then we are failing God, by having responded to orientation mistakenly and damagingly. Worst of all, by having been unwilling to listen to the experience of our same-sex oriented neighbours, we have in some respects responded ignorantly, and worst of all, with an ignorance that could have been resolved by simply listening more to those most deeply affected. In many cases, we have shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces (Matt 23:13). We need not continue to do so.

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I welcome any corrections, improvements or critiques either [here](#)<sup>15</sup> or by email. Please also note that this paper is released under a Creative Commons license that permits reuse in other works, so feel free to use it in that way, whether to agree or disagree.

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<sup>14</sup>[http://180.org.au/some-practical-scenarios-for-discussion\\_20140906.html](http://180.org.au/some-practical-scenarios-for-discussion_20140906.html)

<sup>15</sup>[http://180.org.au/romans-1-and-evangelical-same-sex-marriage\\_20140906.html](http://180.org.au/romans-1-and-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20140906.html)

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