

Evangelical Churches and Same Sex Attraction

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Belonging to a Baptist church in Surry Hills, a suburb with a 30% gay population, makes same-sex attraction first of all a very personal question. There is no option of avoiding the issue of same-sex attraction; retreating from public life; deeming this a marginal or unimportant concern; deferring the questions it raises; treating it (it?) in abstract or impersonal terms; enforcing silence; talking over the top of others; assuming those concerned are absent; or sending them elsewhere. Instead, we have to find a validly Christian and specifically Evangelical resolution of the questions raised. By this I mean one that integrates biblical theology, pastoral experience and incarnational mission, without compromise. If this improves our political and ethical stance, that is good, but only of secondary importance. We must never politicise or polarise issues that are primarily pastoral and missional. We must exemplify Christ's character and live out his mission in doing so. We must be *fair*. This means that we must compare equally godly persons having heterosexual or homosexual attraction; equally permanent and involuntary forms of sexual attraction; and equally faithful and monogamous relationships.

Evangelicals see themselves as having a natural pastoral and missional focus: they are all about caring and communicating. They should be good at listening. Without listening to those who are same-sex attracted we can't evaluate their experience biblically, pastorally or socially.¹ Without listening, we cannot attain understanding or empathy. This is the quality most missing, and most desperately required, in the present controversy, and the Christian imperatives for mission and reconciliation require us to bridge that gulf. Unfortunately, several factors prevent us listening, or even discussing same-sex attraction in our churches, let alone having discussions with same-sex attracted members of our churches or local communities.

By defining a series of Canaanite sins as abhorrent and detestable, Leviticus sets up a *deliberate taboo* around same sex intercourse; it becomes unmentionable. This is reinforced in Eph 5:5,12, where "it is shameful to even mention what [the sexually immoral] do secretly," and 1 Cor 6:18, in which sexual sin is more serious than sins that occur outside the body. A taboo is not necessarily a bad thing – we don't give the idea of rape a "fair hearing" – but a taboo can only be distinguished from a prejudice by explaining its rationale. Also, scripture itself does not always give reasons for what is wrong with same sex intercourse, usually linking it directly to shame or abhorrence, as if the underlying reasons were self-evident. Compounding this, many on opposite sides of these questions think their position is also self-evident – self-evidently true and good – and that no-one of moral sense could possibly think differently. The condemnations found in scripture are so deep and broad that nothing remains to discuss; it hardly seems as if rethinking one aspect will change the picture as a whole. Moreover, discussion in this area is usually characterised by impatience, indignation, anger, revulsion and boundary maintenance, whether regarding same sex intercourse as repulsive, or Christian churches as "haters". Large parts of the Christian and gay communities do not believe that the other will respond to reason or values, only that they are a dangerous fringe who may at best be stopped from causing further damage. Conflict is assumed from the outset and the assumption becomes self-fulfilling.

In this paper I will outline the experience of people who grow up same-sex attracted in one of our churches, and the process of discovery they go through over time. *Writing Themselves In 3* was a 2010 La Trobe University survey of over 3,000 "same sex attracted and gender

¹ I appreciate this emphasis in Barry McGrath's closing chapter of *Sexegesis*.

questioning” 14–21 year old Australians. When asked at what age they first “became aware of these feelings”, 25% replied either “always” or by the age of ten, and 35% and 30% said between 11–13 and 14–16, respectively. By these figures 60% were aware of same-sex attraction by the age of 13, the same result as in the 2004 survey (WTI3, p.20). What proportion of these people experienced *only* same-sex attraction? This was 84% of the male respondents, with 14% attracted to both sexes and the rest unsure. On the other hand, a little under 40% of female respondents were attracted solely to women, with 54% attracted to both sexes and about 8% unsure. There were also respondents solely attracted to the opposite sex, presumably from the ‘gender questioning’ group (WTI3, p.17). This may provide a very approximate sense of the balance that exists between same-sex attraction and bisexuality for men and women. As specified, I am only addressing in this study the case of exclusive same-sex attraction.

In this paper I will use the figure generally accepted by Evangelical writers that between 1½ and 2% of the population are same-sex attracted.² Some of my academic reviewers have suggested higher figures, in the range of 3–5%, but the accepted figure is more than sufficient already to establish our obligations as churches. 1.5% means that approximately one in sixty of the youth in our churches are same-sex attracted and, if we are genuinely representative of our communities, one in sixty adults as well. In a church or youth group or school of 300 there should be five such people on average. If there were 147,000 Baptists in Australia and we were representative of our communities, we would have between 2,200 and 3,000 same-sex attracted congregation members. In social terms, our stance on same-sex attraction will directly concern 340,000–450,000 of our fellow Australians, or about one hundred million people globally. If we are not aware of this same-sex attracted community in our churches then we are either unrepresentative of our society, or those congregation members do not trust us. That would mean that we are failing either in mission, in pastoral care, or in both of these responsibilities.

At Surry Hills Baptist Church our experience of listening to same-sex attracted people, Christian and otherwise, has come about in several ways – simply living in the suburb that we do and being open to talk; having deliberately built our community as a safe space for those experiencing crisis, vulnerability or rejection; having people referred to us that other churches cannot accept; and, with the Salvation Army’s OASIS centre, having run a pastoral ministry conference called *A Different Conversation* in Surry Hills at Mardi Gras for several years.

The Experience of Same Sex Orientation

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

In this paper, I will not quote the experience of any same-sex attracted person who is associated with Surry Hills Baptist Church or who I otherwise know personally. The quotes which follow are, however, representative of their stories. These are taken from the 2010 La Trobe University study already mentioned, and its predecessor in 2004. These studies respectively surveyed 3,100 and 1,700 people aged between 14 and 21. No questions were

2 e.g. Jim Wallace’s article in *The Punch*, “Gay marriage is threatening our freedom of faith” <http://www.acl.org.au/2012/04/jim-wallace-writes-in-the-punch-gay-marriage-is-threatening-our-freedom-of-faith/> (30 April 2012), or Gordon Preece’s citation (*Sexegesis*, p.11) of Harvey’s 2003 findings that men were 97.4% heterosexual and women 97.7% heterosexual, with 1.6% of men exclusively gay and 0.9% of women exclusively lesbian, the balance being largely bisexual.

asked on religious subjects, but in both surveys more than a hundred respondents mentioned religious involvement in their answers. How many of these stories could have come from *our* churches?

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the 2010 survey, the 4% who mentioned religious involvement were more likely to report feeling unsafe at home, more likely to report thoughts of self-harm and suicide, and more likely to carry out self-harm, though their reported rate of attempted suicide was the same as for those who did not mention religious involvement. This figure may be biased in that those with negative religious experience would have been more likely to mention it than those with neutral or positive experience, but that qualification does not free us of concern or obligation. We should expect our church environments to cancel out the dangers in wider society, never to copy or even exacerbate them. It can hardly be disputed that Evangelical faith means, in part, some extra burdens, that we haven't helped these young people to carry. WT13 found, across all respondents, that the rates of attempted suicide were about 6% for those who had never been abused for being same-sex attracted, 17% for those who had been verbally abused, and 36% for those who had been physically abused (p.51). Those who had been physically abused comprised 18% of respondents (p.39). The motivation for attempting suicide in consequence is well expressed in the following WT13 quote:

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

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

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

As far as I have seen, heterosexual Christians have not typically spoken with same-sex attracted Christians about their experience and as a result lack understanding and empathy. I have found that listening to their experience leads to the following convictions: 1) Significant diversity exists in human gender and sexuality, some of which, especially intersex, does not resolve into male and female categories at all. In this paper, however, I will be discussing only the case of lifelong and exclusive same-sex attraction. The reason for this choice is that same-sex attraction presents our churches with the most common and serious issues, and also provides the primary impetus for same-sex marriage legislation in our society. 2) A same-sex attracted person experiences involuntarily and permanent attraction to others of the same sex, in exactly the same way that most people experience involuntarily and permanent attraction to the opposite sex. Correspondingly, they are usually as little attracted to the opposite sex as a heterosexual person is to their own. I will refer to this as a same-sex *orientation*. 3) This attraction is not limited to sexual desire; it encompasses the romantic desire for intimacy and affection, as well as the desire for life companionship and family. For a heterosexual person to be able to empathise with a fellow Christian or community member who is exclusively same-sex attracted, we have to try to re-imagine all the tens of thousands of moments in our life in which we were conscious of sexual or romantic desire: *Wow, she's cute! I wonder if she likes me. OMG! She's in my dream! Why didn't she talk to me? Should I ask her out? What would we talk about? Does she want to have kids? Who's that guy she's talking to?* (Or substitute male/female as required.) We should have no trouble recalling these emotions, especially as we experienced them in adolescence, and the names of the people who prompted these thoughts. Then, we have to imagine that *every single time*, it was someone of our own sex who triggered these thoughts and feelings, while no-one of the other sex did. That may take a little while to process, so pause and think about how you would have handled that from the age of 13 to 23. Then, to empathise with growing up in church, imagine trying to reverse every single one of them. And then imagine that everything you do and say has to be filtered and censored so that no-one can ever know this is happening. And facing this for years on end, alone. It should not surprise us if people crack under these pressures, though it should surprise us if we are okay with that. 4) As already seen, depression and self-harm are very common outcomes for same-sex attracted youth, quite possibly more so in church than elsewhere. Whatever our intentions, the present cultures of our churches are in many cases *actively harmful*, rather than helpful or healing, for people who grow up same-sex attracted. 5) Same-sex attracted youth in our churches and communities do not generally expect us to understand their situation or to be able to help in any way. As a result they usually address same-sex attraction alone, online or elsewhere.

I suggest that until same-sex attracted congregation members trust us sufficiently to open up, most of us will have no way to know whether or not a raft of (familiar?) reactions are just cop-outs: "Well they should have known to talk to someone, shouldn't they?" "Godly sorrow should lead to repentance!" "Why did they let things get that bad?" "Self-harm just shows how dangerous this is! – we must take a *hard line* more than ever now!" "If God told them to be celibate, God will give them the grace to do it!" "See! They left church. They can't have been *really* Christian in the first place."

Orientation Change

Many churches expect that a same-sex attracted person will change their orientation then get married. To Evangelicals this is almost axiomatic: same sex intercourse, being a sin, must fit a common-sense Evangelical model of sin and repentance in which every sin is a free choice, corruption of the passions and the will only results from prior compromise, repentance leads to change, to freedom from sin, and a happy and fulfilled life. It seems to Evangelicals that “ex-gay” or “reparative” therapy should both exist and be effective.

In this paper I assume no particular view, genetic or otherwise, of why any individual will be same-sex attracted. For all practical purposes, the distribution is random and I will treat it as such. What is perfectly clear, however, is that attempts to change orientation have been generally ineffective. I am aware of some reported successes such as those mentioned in the studies by Spitzer (2001), Jones and Yarhouse (2007), and anecdotally by others. But absolutely no-one claims a high success rate, and it is widely argued that orientation change is no more possible than for a heterosexual person, and that apparent changes only indicate degrees of bisexuality in some people.

The general understanding amongst professional psychologists is that “efforts to change sexual orientation have not been shown to be effective or safe.”³ Against this background, Professor Robert Spitzer, who was more than anyone responsible for the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychological Association’s list of mental disorders in 1973, published “Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation?” in 2001. His study was based on 45-minute phone interviews with 200 people who claimed that their sexual orientation had changed, and found that it was possible, though given the difficulty of finding suitable interviewees, was probably very rare. 11% of those he interviewed reported achieving a complete absence of same-sex attraction. He retracted his findings in 2012, saying “I offered several (unconvincing) reasons why it was reasonable to assume that the subject’s reports of change were credible and not self-deception or outright lying. But the simple fact is that there was no way to determine if the subject’s accounts of change were valid.”⁴

Professors Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse published “Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation” in 2007. The authors are both Christians, making this study immune to the criticism that it is simply an expression of unbelief, and this seems the most widely quoted conservative study. Jones and Yarhouse reported a 15% “conversion” rate with participants in the Exodus ex-gay ministry, enabling the conclusion that change was possible. But 15% is still Russian Roulette with five bullets – that’s not the kind of odds churches think they are giving young people when they urge them to change. And even that figure was due to a highly optimistic methodology and a loose definition of “change.”

i) The study accepted self-reported progress, despite acknowledging that this can be more hope than fact, and is not uncommonly recanted later; ii) a high number of drop-outs were not counted as failures; and iii) successful conversion was when a person “reported that they *felt* their change to be successful, and who reported *substantial reductions* in homosexual attraction and *substantial conversion* to heterosexual attraction and functioning” (emph. added). There is no suggestion in this study that any person at any time succeeded in *replacing* same-sex attraction with heterosexual attraction.

In July 2012, the *New York Times* reported that “the leader of Exodus, in a series of public statements and a speech to the group’s annual meeting last week, renounced some of the movement’s core beliefs. Alan Chambers, 40, the president, declared that there was no cure for homosexuality and that ‘reparative therapy’ offered false hopes to gays and could even be harmful.”⁵ He added that Exodus needed to “move beyond” its slogan *Change is possible*. The movement experienced a fracture over these statements in 2012.

3 “Practice Guidelines for LGBT Clients Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients” <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/guidelines.aspx> (Accessed: 25 Aug 2012)

4 Quoted [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Spitzer_\(psychiatrist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Spitzer_(psychiatrist)) (Accessed: 25 Aug 2012)

5 “Rift Forms in Movement as Belief in Gay ‘Cure’ Is Renounced” <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/us/a-leaders-renunciation-of-ex-gay-tenets-causes-a-schism.html?pagewanted=all> (7 July 2012)

Christian media and lobbyists have tended to selectively report favourable findings about orientation change and ignore others, emphasising that “it is possible” or that gay people “can” change. This is then, of course, understood by others to mean that *any individual* can do so, and that it is their fault if they cannot. In *Sexgenesis* (p.124) Denise Cooper-Clarke quotes with approval the following line from EA’s *Beyond Stereotypes* (p.35):

Sexual orientation can and does change significantly for some people – those wanting it and seeking therapy.

The Word Biblical Commentary on Leviticus expresses the same thought:

Change in a redeemed person’s life takes place slowly; nevertheless, as a person is open to the work of the Holy Spirit, amazing changes take place (Rom 12:1–2).⁶

But this optimistic tone is lost completely if we have to qualify these phrases with, say, “fewer than 15% of those wanting it and seeking therapy.” Also, the only supporting reference offered for this claim in *Beyond Stereotypes* was the now-retracted 2001 study by Robert Spitzer (see above).

In *Sexgenesis*, under the heading “The reality of change” (p.148), Barry McGrath gives only one example of “transformation”, the story of a woman who “is not seeking to be heterosexual, not looking to be cured, she is merely seeking to live a holy and obedient life,” and whose change is solely a change of will. Without knowing that woman, I would not suggest that this was an inappropriate course for her to take. But I would be very surprised if Evangelicals generally thought that this was the best-case “reality of change” that could be mustered.

In view of these results, I am not persuaded that any church can reasonably assume that their success rate will exceed the best results of dedicated specialist ministries. Even if this were as high as 15%, we still could never in good conscience promise that any specific person could change from being same-sex attracted.

The Challenge of Celibacy

Our churches usually expect that if a same-sex attracted person is unsuccessful in changing their orientation, they should be celibate. The logic is straightforward: heterosexual marriage and lifelong celibacy are the only valid options. Here’s one Baptist expression of this expectation:

In 1975, amid public debate preceding decriminalisation of homosexuality, the Public Affairs Committee (precursor to the Social Issues Committee) published a pamphlet supporting decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults but arguing that the practice was “abnormal” and that many homosexuals “can be successfully readjusted to heterosexuality.” The pamphlet also recommended that those Christians for whom a “cure” was unsuccessful should seek divine help in refraining from homosexual acts, and that they should consult a family doctor, psychiatrist or minister of religion to resolve their problem.⁷

My discussion of the practical effect of celibacy should not be taken to prejudge the biblical questions, which I treat in a separate paper.⁸ Rather I wish to ensure that Christians and churches *really do empathise* with the issues faced. Before reading further, how would you say that the celibacy generally expected of a same-sex attracted person differs from that expected of a Christian person who cannot find a suitable spouse?

The WT13 data showed that 60% of same-sex attracted youth were aware of this attraction by the age of 13; that means that Christian teenagers who are same-sex attracted will have usually spent several years trying to change their attraction by the time anyone else becomes aware of it.

⁶ John E. Hartley, WBC: *Leviticus* (Word Books: Dallas, 1992), p.300.

⁷ Quoted in “NSW Baptists and same sex marriage” <http://rodbenson.com/2012/06/19/nsw-baptists-and-same-sex-marriage/> (19 Jun 2012).

⁸ See “Romans 1 and Evangelical Same Sex Marriage”, at <http://chapman.id.au/papers>.

They are likely to have a good idea about their odds of changing: probably not good, so that they see no sex, romantic love, or family in their Christian future. They are also likely to have a good idea how their family, Christian friends and church would treat them if they knew: probably not well, so that they face the issue on their own. And they have likely been reading scripture and thinking about having a shameful and damnable desire that seems to be indelibly imprinted. *No pressure*. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see how well a fifteen year old is going to handle this.

In contrast, I have heard a senior NSW Baptist say during 2012 that same-sex attracted Christians should be "celibate like anyone else," if they "believe in the transforming power of Jesus." That is to say, we're all celibate until marriage and all have things to overcome, and for same-sex attracted people, changing their orientation is just one of those things. But a same-sex attracted teenager in one of our churches cannot be celibate "like anyone else" because anyone else can be encouraged in their celibacy by the encouragement of their peers and the anticipation of keeping themselves *for* someone. Life without support or hope is a different proposition; to view this as more-or-less the same situation as that of a heterosexual teenager is uncomprehending at best. Most problematically, this implies that any failure to change – and the ensuing lifelong celibacy – is solely the fault of that individual. The stress created is intense and unrelieved. Community support can in some ways ameliorate this, but a same sex *oriented* person – someone for whom same sex attraction is permanent, involuntary and exclusive – must nonetheless attain an almost monastic spiritual life to deal with these pressures.⁹

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

These are the factors which I suggest most require our understanding and empathy. Without empathising we cannot meaningfully love anyone. In principle, our churches' lack of engagement with same-sex attracted people is due to a commendable concern for holiness. But without empathy this can be lovelessness for every practical purpose, and there is hardly a more foundational Christian teaching than that lovelessness nullifies every other virtue we possess (Luke 6:27-32, 10:25-37, 25:31-46; 1 Cor 13) – including ostensible holiness. It is a dominant New Testament theme that practising exclusion in the name of holiness is more than capable of setting us in opposition to God himself. In the familiar language of Matt 25, how we treat "the least" is nothing more or less than how we treat Jesus Christ himself, and he invites us to reflect on being judged by that standard: Sheep or goat? Our churches, which were not renowned for visiting the sick during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, are beginning from a low base in applying the lessons of Matt 25 to our same-sex attracted neighbours.

Our Mission

Same-sex attracted youth who grow up in our churches usually resolve the conflict they experience by leaving church. The best case then is that they decide their church did not represent God and that God still understands and loves them. Far more commonly, however, they reject faith completely. Quoting WT13 again:

I used to feel completely terrible and suffered from a lot of self-hate

⁹ An excellent example is the understanding and compassion shown by Pale Dale of *Church by the Bridge* in Kirribilli, in his May 2013, talk "Same-sex Desires" <<http://www.cbtb.org.au/bibletalks/same-sex-desires>>.

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

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

God taught about love. So how is being gay against God... I believe in my lifetime I will be someone who brings (LGBT) Children back to the Church and lets them know there is a place for them. I will study Theology and see if I can do anything for gay marriage, if I can't I will still help all the LGBT people [and] let them know there's a place for them in the Church and Gods Kingdom. (Andrea, 19 years)

Christians and churches who do not think that these are good responses may ask if they have communicated any realistic hope of a better alternative.

When churches decide to “stand up” and take a “hard line” against “the gay agenda,” we well-nigh guarantee that same-sex attracted members of our church or our local communities will *never* trust us with their most important secret. As Baptists, in particular, we emphasise our pastoral strengths. It wouldn't be the end of the world if we went the extra mile for those who are same-sex attracted. Most likely none of us are so exploitative or self-absorbed as the false shepherds of Ezekiel 34 – but how well does Ezekiel speak on behalf of the young people quoted on page 3?

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

The witness of our churches is currently severely compromised by our public positions, both real and assumed, toward the members and interests of the gay communities. It is widely believed that Evangelical Christians and churches *hate* gay people. Many in our communities think of Christians firstly as the angry “Lev 20:13” placard-wavers they see on TV and whose images constantly circulate in social media. They associate such churches with a biblical *death penalty* for their friends and family who are same-sex attracted, and with the propagation of aggressive and irrational prejudices. To such a person churches like ours are unmitigated and intolerable evils. When our heterosexual neighbours think we hate their gay friends, family and colleagues, they will prefer them over us in every conflict of interest, question of trust, difference of opinion, or determination of credibility or morality. Unless our arguments are clear and compelling they will be dismissed as rationalisations of prejudice. This makes it very easy for anti-Christian activists to characterise churches and Christians as blinkered and ignorant.¹⁰

Uncertainty, discomfort and intimidation in these matters has resulted in communicative paralysis in our churches. This has meant that when a prejudiced or trite or ignorant message – “God hates fags” or “Eve not Steve” or “bestiality next” – has made the news, no counter-message from the rest of us has cut through; and certainly no credible message of hope and compassion. We have not collectively honoured the deeply Pauline concern that our lives and conduct should win the respect of outsiders, or that if we do have enemies, they should have no legitimate critiques to make of us, so that the progress of the gospel would not be hindered (1 Thess 4:12, Col 4:5, 1 Tim 3:7 cf. 1 Pet 2:11–12, 3:16; or the implications of 1 Thess 2:16, Rom 2:24 and 3:8, 1 Cor 9:12).

¹⁰ (cf. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp.289–91)

Our churches should have countered this perception of hatred and prejudice by articulating a believable message of love and hope for those who are same-sex attracted, and those who know and love them. Not to have done so is a dereliction and a betrayal of our primary responsibilities to God and to our friends, family and neighbours.

Conclusion

Evangelical churches have responded to same sex attraction and orientation in a way that has been harmful to people in our care, and has alienated marginal people in our communities, and has undermined our witness in public life. There should not be a contradiction between biblical faithfulness, and the equally biblical demands of love, compassion, mission and pastoral care. Either our understanding of scripture, or our application and outworking of our scriptural convictions – or both – have to be fault in some way. We need to work out which, and to correct this.

Three Practical Scenarios

The pastoral and missional problems raised by same sex attraction and orientation, and exemplified in the many negative outcomes for same sex oriented people in our churches can be encapsulated reasonably well in three basic scenarios. In each case, suppose you are a minister or leader in your church:

Dave → a teenager in your church tells you that they are same-sex attracted. You cannot in any way fault this person's godliness; but they beg you not to tell anyone, including their parents, believing they will lose their friends, family and church if anyone finds out. Suppose that a survey of your church reveals that most members think same-sex attracted people have chosen to be that way, just need to repent, pose a danger to children, and are too repugnant even to discuss. How do you proceed? Does your feeling or judgement on the matter change if he says he is bisexual?

Nick → a faithful leader in your church is same-sex attracted. He has been through endless counselling and long bouts of depression and loneliness over a period of twenty years. It is likely that he has been through a more strenuous and thankless trial than anyone else in your congregation, has persevered in ministry, at which he excels, and has remained celibate. However, he has experienced no change whatsoever, and no longer sees any hope of changing. What he wants more than anything is a family and life partner, but is not in any way sexually attracted to women. What options are open to him? Are these options the same as for Dave, who has not been through the same experience?

Kim + Jen → two young women in your local community have a civil union and are raising two children. They are a schoolteacher and a journalist by profession. They grew up in Christian families, have been thinking a lot about God lately, and have begun attending your church on account of a relative in your congregation. Do you tell them to break up their family, have a celibate marriage, or ... what? Does your answer create a precedent in which a same-sex attracted person simply has to leave church, get married, come back, and continue on? – and what then do you say to Nick or to Dave about that? Does your feeling or judgement on the matter change if they are a male couple, if they have no children, or if they have no Christian background? What do you tell them and their friends about your church's view of the LGBT communities?