

Romans 1 and Evangelical Same Sex Marriage

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Abstract

This paper presents a biblical argument for same sex marriage between same sex oriented partners, arranged in three questions: 1) Does scripture address orientation, understood as permanent, involuntary and exclusive same sex attraction? No, Paul makes that clear in four different ways in ROM 1. 2) Do the biblical judgements condemn same sex intercourse *in a same sex marriage between same sex oriented partners* as immoral and abhorrent? No: There are eleven reasons why same sex intercourse is biblically condemned; eight do not apply to the case of same sex marriage between same sex oriented partners, while the three that apply cannot generate the biblical judgements of immorality and abhorrence without the first eight. 3) Does a same sex marriage between same sex oriented Christians fulfil the biblical ideal of marriage? In every way possible in the permanent absence of heterosexual attraction, yes it does. So, in the absence of any moral condemnation from scripture, it is to be recommended over the expectation of lifelong celibacy. This provides Evangelicals with a new and better response to the biblical and practical problems raised by same sex orientation.

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 aim of this paper is to add a fifth alternative to this list, and to argue that it is in every way superior to the other four. For the purpose of this discussion I will understand “same sex orientation” as permanent, involuntary and exclusive same sex attraction.

First Alternative. It is common, albeit decreasingly so, for Evangelicals to argue or to act as if same sex orientation does not exist. In this approach, “homosexuality” is both a practice and a 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. In consequence, “homosexuality” is just sexual temptation, albeit of an offensive and clearly compulsive kind of which it is preferable not to speak. God always makes it possible to overcome temptation, so that a person can’t be “born that way,” and 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, then what is there to discuss? In this view, homosexuality is associated with a powerful social delusion in which politically active groups have tried to lobby against religious freedom of conscience, requiring Evangelicals must take a strong political stand to protect themselves and society.

The great strength of this first alternative, and one I will preserve in my own proposal, is that it gives full weight to the very clear biblical statements about immorality and abhorrence, about which most Christians have been uncomfortable and disinclined to speak. However, there are serious Evangelical problems with this position, mostly arising from our equally biblical responsibilities for pastoral care, and from the actual experience of same sex oriented youth in our churches. I have outlined

our pastoral and missional problems in detail in my paper “Evangelical Churches and Same Sex Orientation” (see <http://chapman.id.au/papers>), and I refer readers there if a detailed introduction is required. For now, a short summary of that paper will suffice:

Same sex orientation – understood as permanent, involuntary and exclusive same sex attraction – is experienced by a few percent of the population. If this figure were 1.5% to 2%, to pick a low estimate that Evangelical writers have acknowledged, this would be one in sixty people. One child in every twenty three-child families. Four hundred thousand Australians, and one hundred million of our global neighbours: a population greater than the world’s twelfth most populous nation. This is a random distribution for all practical purposes: same sex orientation could have happened to any one of us, any of our friends, any of our children. No-one has reported any general success in changing orientation, so that the ultimatum to change or be celibate has almost always meant lifelong celibacy. This has also laid all of the blame for not changing upon on the (usually young) people involved, with predictably harsh consequences for well-being and for faith. 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 have no hope of sexual or romantic intimacy in their future. No pressure. We don’t see this happening in church, we only hear about it afterward. Same sex attracted teens in our churches don’t 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. Much of the time this is exactly what occurs, and they see this and learn to hide, so they face up to same sex attraction alone, online or elsewhere. They listen to our politics, and what we say 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. And 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 other responses which acknowledge that some people, in society and in our churches, do experience permanent, involuntary and exclusive same sex attraction through no obvious choice of their own.

Second Alternative. When Evangelicals have felt unable to reconcile same sex orientation with the biblical prohibitions, we have sometimes just ignored or discarded the prohibitions. This can be done implicitly through vagueness or avoidance, such as politically staying “on message” and sticking with our own preferred talking points, or explicitly by giving up on the Evangelical understanding of scripture, usually for variously liberal or atheistic approaches to scripture. Evangelicals insisting upon very forced readings of scripture would fit into this category; which is to say, it’s not a consistent Evangelical solution. Can we do better?

These first and second alternatives have a lot in common. They resolve the conflict by denying either orientation or the obvious reading of scripture, and fit best with a relationship of assumed conflict and opposition between the Evangelical and the LGBT communities. Neither approach is therefore helpful for a same sex oriented Evangelical, who exists in both communities.

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 baseline realities such as God’s love and Christ’s character, or the need to work among and serve all people. In this case, we reject antagonism or disengagement, acknowledge our uncertainty, and (hopefully) work toward a resolution.

This maintains a visible degree of humanity in our engagement with same sex oriented Christians and the LGBT communities, for whom it is of course refreshing to find a church that admits when it doesn't know something. Committing to love and serve just the same can create middle ground for discussion and learning that does not exist in the first two alternatives, and a safe space to think through the issues. But without attaining any clear or helpful solution, the problems summarised above remain. Over time just "holding the tension" reduces to either the second or the fourth of these alternatives. Ultimately, actual solutions are required.

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 fourth position that is empathetic but firm. Orientation is recognized, and a person's journey with orientation is supported by the community. But nothing changes in moral or biblical terms, so that the options are to change and be married, or to remain celibate for life. This comes in two varieties, one which supports reparative therapy and encourages heterosexual marriages, and one which recognizes the rarity of change, and so sees therapy as ineffective and marriage as inadvisable.

Because this approach acknowledges that same sex orientation is not the fault of the individual, nor a source of shame, nor something that cuts them off from community, it fosters a much healthier social environment than the first alternative. It also strongly emphasises the biblical prohibitions, though tending to selectively soft-pedal the judgements of abhorrence out of sensitivity. This still requires lifelong celibacy from anyone who is same sex oriented – with all the biblical reservations about that being imposed on anyone, and the marginalization that this necessarily involves, and the extra spiritual discipline required just to be acceptable – but all these negatives are seen as morally unavoidable, and at least those concerned are not trivialised or ostracised. However, this still looks as if the church is simply coping with scripture rather than vindicating its judgements to outsiders, who, absent commitment to scripture, see imposed celibacy as unnecessary, unfeeling, and unequal, and all thorough 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. But more problematically, and at a deeper level, it does not resolve the underlying tension between orientation and scripture, or find 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 – usually – for *others* to live with them, not the ones who make decisions about policy and doctrine. Is a better solution available?

Fifth Alternative. In this paper I will put forward what I think is a new biblical argument that Evangelical churches ought to support same sex marriage for same sex oriented Christians, and should understand these to be Christian marriages before God that are wholly consistent with every major Evangelical conviction about Christian scripture. It should be clear by the end that this understanding also resolves the underlying tension between orientation and scripture, and gives a convincing answer to the fundamental question "Why, in simple terms that anyone could understand, the life of a same sex married couple should be thought both immoral and abhorrent?" – the question each of these alternatives must answer publicly. This is a thoroughly confronting question all round, but better asked and answered than to be left unexamined. This argument, which will be made primarily from Romans 1, will be 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 in the context of a same sex marriage – assuming that to be a marriage between a same sex oriented couple – and for what reasons?
3. Does a same sex marriage fulfil the biblical ideal of marriage for a couple who lack heterosexual attraction?

Before proceeding, though, I must address same sex oriented readers (if any of you have made it this far). This is partly for the benefit of others, since the Evangelical

assumption that you are absent is the most destructive habit we exhibit when we speak about you, and that habit must be challenged. But mainly I am speaking to you directly. I am working here with standard Evangelical assumptions, 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: by current or former churches, friends and families, and Christian schools most of all. I recognise that these passages will open wounds, and that this in itself should be a warning light for Evangelicals. It is conspicuously hypocritical to emphasise our faithfulness to scripture while neglecting those parts that require us to be loving and hospitable to you. Failing to love our neighbours is one of the two greatest possible failures in following Christ (MARK 12:18–30). How we treat same sex attracted people and the whole LGBT community is nothing more or less than how we treat Jesus Christ himself (cf. MATT 25:31–46), and it is we who should expect to be judged by that standard. I hope that I can offer you a better understanding of scripture than you have previously heard, and that this will be healing, as I think theology done well should ultimately be. But you must be the judge of that.

1 Does Romans 1, and Christian Scripture as a whole, take account of same sex orientation?

The text of ROM 1 is the primary lens through which same sex issues are discussed in Evangelical churches. Amongst others, Michael Bird and Sarah Harris have recently argued that in writing this passage Paul 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 (Bird and Preece, eds. *Sexegesis*, Anglican Press Australia, Brisbane, 2012, pp. 95–100). They argue that Paul 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. This caution is well noted, though we should of course add “or vice versa”. However, Paul tells us four times over in the text of ROM 1 that he is not addressing anything resembling our contemporary understanding of same sex orientation, whatever views he does or does not know, or credit, in various classical and Hellenistic thinkers, or in his own contemporaries.

Before I outline these, however, let me say what I mean by orientation, as we must address it. I will understand same sex orientation as a permanent, involuntary and exclusive same-sex attraction, consisting 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 somebody 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. I will focus on these groups because they are the most directly challenging for Evangelicals on moral grounds, and because they are the largest groups that will be seeking same-sex marriages in our societies.

How does Paul show, in four different ways, that he is not addressing orientation? 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. However, people who were never heterosexually oriented have never made that exchange; their orientation has not been a consequence of voluntary choices. This distinction is reflected in the way that Paul speaks of people having “dishonourable lusts” or “shameful passions.” Evangelicals do not link orientation itself with shame or dishonour, let alone guilt, because they see same sex attraction as analogous to other sexual temptations in which desire is not sinful, only the choice to act upon it. No person can accrue legitimate guilt, shame or dishonour, except by their own choices – at least, not before God, who is just. Secondly, and similarly, Paul addresses a progressive corruption of

sexual desire, and alludes to this in several ways: “God gave them up to degrading passions,” so that they were consumed with them (cf. 1:24, 26, 28). But of course, a person who has never had a heterosexual orientation has not experienced any progressive corruption of that orientation or desire.

Thirdly, Paul is addressing a gentile problem. In this respect he follows Leviticus, which frames LEV 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 from its emphasis upon idolatry, but also in the structure of the argument of Romans as a whole: chapter 1 is an indictment of Hellenistic society, followed in chapter 2 by a corresponding indictment of Jewish society. Paul is laying down a marker in Romans 1 and 2. He is utterly adamant that neither of the factions in the church at Rome have reasons for cultural pride, or prejudice, or precedence over the other. But, of course, if Paul was indicting a gentile phenomenon, he was not addressing same sex orientation, which occurs in every race and nation, including among Jewish people. Fourthly, in this 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 received the freedom from restraint which they desired, but then were mastered by desire; they suppressed truth about God, but then found it hard to perceive when they wished to. In all this, Paul was surely thinking of literal, pagan idolatry, while same sex oriented youth in our society have not become so by worshipping literal, pagan idols. Evangelicals have therefore understood the link with idolatry in more general terms, such as the biblical metaphors of sexual or spiritual idolatry (COL 3:5; or compare the OT metaphor of spiritual adultery). It is certainly true that that people in our own society worship and serve the metaphorical idols of money, sex and power, and put God out of their minds. But this collapses as a general explanation when we note that this is clearly not how young people in our own congregations come to be same sex oriented, especially not with more than 60% knowing that by age 13. Our same sex oriented neighbours have not become so because of idolatry, not even the figurative kind.

We therefore know that Paul was not addressing the question of orientation that we must address. If he had, 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. This is quite important, since 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, in part, as a knowing commentary on LEV 18–20, since Paul writes to his Jewish audience on the basis of their scriptures, quotes those chapters in this letter (LEV 18:5 LXX in ROM 10:5 and GAL 3:12, and LEV 19:18 LXX in ROM 13:9, paralleling Jesus), and uses a new and distinctive term for same sex intercourse, *arsenokoitēs*, that most plausibly derives from the words *arsenos* and *koitēn* (man + bed) in the Greek translations of LEV 18:22 and 20:13, and follows the pattern of *mētrokōitēs* or *doulōkōitēs* for intercourse, respectively, with one’s mother or slave. Romans and Leviticus are biblically definitive on this subject, since every other reference is made in passing. Accordingly, 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 an appendix the size of this paper.

Since it is clear that Scripture did not address orientation, and since it is clear that we must do so, then we must look at what it says about same-sex intercourse and about marriage, and then apply its reasoning and principles to the combined case of same sex marriage and orientation.

2 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 actual, pleasant 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're having coffee with that couple next door, and they ask: "Why do you think our relationship is immoral?"

In public, Evangelicals have argued that same sex marriage will be harmful to society, 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 an anomaly in the way we are arguing. Just hypothetically, what would we do if there arose a political movement to dignify and socially legitimate adultery? Evangelicals would straight-away be on the front foot saying, no, this is immoral, and for reasons X, Y and Z – and we would be seen to be principled and persuasive, since our reasons and principles were in clear view. So why aren't Evangelicals arguing publicly that same sex intercourse is immoral? Wouldn't that be more effective than another round of ad populum petitions? Shouldn't we take the high moral ground on these matters? This seems especially important because it is exactly what Paul does in Romans.

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 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, and something that can be publicly argued from common moral values – just as Paul, amongst other things, is doing here.

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 are 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. We have to take the biblical understanding of same sex intercourse, and of marriage and apply it to this situation; that's Exegesis 101. So, for example, when 1 TIM 1:9 forthrightly lists *arsenokoitai* ("sodomites", KJV) with "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?

Scripture gives eleven reasons. Scripture offers, by my count, eleven reasons why same sex intercourse is to be thought immoral and in fact morally abhorrent. I'm going to spell these out, and see how they apply to same sex marriages. So as not to prejudice the question, I will be making a like-for-like comparison between same sex marriage and heterosexual marriage. This means addressing 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 will be concluding that eight of the biblical reasons do not apply to this case, while the three that do apply do not support the biblical condemnations on their own – not without the first eight reasons to back them up. Throughout, I will be noting how this has become especially apparent in our recent public advocacy against same sex marriage legislation.

Eight reasons do not apply. Of the eleven biblical reasons for condemning same

sex intercourse, eight do not apply to same sex marriages between same sex oriented people. I have already commented on two of these: Biblical connections with idolatry are not a presenting issue in our own society, and even less so in our churches, and no progressive corruption of sexual desire occurs when a person experiences permanent, involuntary and exclusive same sex attraction over the course of their life. #1

A third reason can be seen in the way that same sex intercourse is listed with fornication and adultery in biblical vice lists (1 COR 6:9-11; 1 TIM 1:8-11). As early as Leviticus it carries the same penalty as adultery (LEV 20:10,13), a connection Aquinas grasped this when he categorised it with adultery as a class of fornication (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.122). 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 for providing social security in old age. All social honour built upon these bare necessities, so heterosexual procreation was a universal obligation: two children were the minimum permitted by the Jewish Mishnah, for example (m. Yebamoth 6:6. “A man shall not abstain from procreation unless he already has [two] children.” Against this expectation, same-sex intercourse was almost always either promiscuous or adulterous, and so immoral by default on those grounds. But of course, in a same sex marriage neither promiscuity nor unfaithfulness are any more to be assumed than in a heterosexual marriage. Even if men are generally more promiscuous than women, gay and lesbian marriages would balance out, and specifically Evangelical relationships (since we are comparing like with like) would hold to higher principles in any case. #3

Our fourth, fifth and sixth reasons relate to the word usually translated “effeminacy” (*malakos*, “softness” in 1 COR 6:9), which links together several background issues in the Hellenistic world. It refers not to simple cross dressing or transgender, but rather to feminisation, in modern language. 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 sexual partners (Philo, *Laws* III.37-40 (discussing Lev 18:22); *On Abraham* 135-136; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.200). They 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 implications of 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), there is limited evidence for it in the NT period. This further connects with a sixth reason when sheer abuse, exploitation and humiliation are linked with same sex intercourse in GEN 19 and JDG 19. Obviously, none of these concerns apply to same sex marriages. #4 #5 #6

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.” Some kind of personal harm is in view, which must have links with same sex intercourse. I think that this refers most naturally to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). We know at least of syphilis existing in Europe at this time from its congenital effects on skeletons preserved at Pompeii, and it’s effects alone sufficiently account for Paul’s language. But of course STDs aren’t an issue in faithful and monogamous relationships of any kind. #7

Eighthly, sexual compulsion and intemperance is also condemned in ROM 1:27: men became “consumed with passion.” Temperance was emphasised by Jewish writers of the period as a point of commonality between Jewish and, especially, Stoic ethics. This is noted especially by Philo, who links illicitness directly with obsessiveness in those pursuing same sex intercourse (Again: Philo, *Laws* III.37-40, discussing LEV 18:22). But in practice same sex marriages are no more prone to excesses of passion than heterosexual marriages are. As with several other reasons here, the dynamics of marriage themselves resolve the problems that scripture condemned. #8

My findings thus far may be summarised as follows: A same sex marriage between same-sex oriented people has no necessary connection with promiscuity, unfaithfulness, prostitution, idolatry, feminisation or exploitation. It is no more characterised by sexual compulsion than heterosexual attraction is, and does not corrupt any pre-existing heterosexual desire. These eight reasons for condemning same-sex intercourse in Christian Scripture simply don’t apply to an Evangelical evaluation of same sex marriages between same sex oriented people. They give us no reason to think that same-sex intercourse would be immoral in that situation, nor be condemned by God.

Three reasons apply, but don't condemn. The final three reasons that underlie the biblical condemnations certainly seem to apply to same sex orientation and marriage, considered together. These are that same sex intercourse is unnatural, that it causes social harm, and that it transgresses a heterosexual norm and ideal that benefits humanity. You will recognise these arguments from recent advocacy against marriage equality. This pattern in our advocacy is perhaps an acknowledgement that the first eight reasons do not apply – else why not use some of them to argue publicly that same sex marriage is immoral? And I will suggest that it also explains why Evangelical advocacy against same-sex marriage has been so completely unpersuasive to outsiders. This second category of reasons is unable, on its own, to generate the moral condemnations – the immorality and the abhorrence – that we find in scripture.

Continuing my numbering, the ninth of the eleven biblical reasons is the judgement of unnaturalness that we find in ROM 1:26–27 (and JUDE 1:7, though that depends more on translation). Many of the first eight reasons given above warrant the term “unnatural,” as an expression of moral disgust. Amongst their other faults, they include 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. And while such perversion or corruption of sexuality was a presenting issue in Greek and Roman society, it does not occur when people who have always been same sex oriented get same sex married. But there are other issues to consider here.

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 recognising that this is a rhetorical question expecting the answer yes. Greek and Roman views of masculinity and femininity – what was ‘natural’ for a man or woman to be and do – taught this, however, and in that context, how men and women wore their hair in public gatherings was a matter of social propriety. Paul, in 1 COR 11, shows that what was “unnatural” and even “disgraceful” for Greeks and Romans is not automatically immoral for us.

Our question then becomes: does ROM 1:27 link nature with creation? There is no connection made within in the text. 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, but nothing here suggests that the judgement ‘unnatural’ in vv.26–27 is understood as natural revelation. The main alternatives are that ‘natural’ means either health or purpose, and these are my next two questions. If what is natural describes well-being – an harmonious social system, or system of “sexual ecology” in some recent writing – then what is “unnatural” means social harm in the case of same sex marriage: see reason #10. If nature means design or purpose – a created pattern or ideal for human flourishing – then what is “unnatural” reduces to reason #11, the biblical ideal of marriage. I will discuss these next.

Tenthly, it is argued that same-sex marriage will cause social harm, damage the fabric of society, and thus affect human well-being. This is the most tenuous claim to establish biblically. It may be implicit in the use of same-sex intercourse to exemplify social failure in GEN 19, JDG 19, and perhaps ROM 1 also (*esp. the wrap-up in vv. 28–32*). 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. However, since causing harm is usually morally wrong, the demonstration of any harm whatsoever arising directly from same-sex marriages must raise at least some moral questions.

Recent advocacy has been focused more on risks of serious harm, than on documented patterns, even when there are countries where same-sex marriage has been legal for eight or ten years now, and trends should be visible. The arguments that a

child needs a mother and a father are plausible enough, but to hold these risks against a measuring stick, we could ask if outcomes would be better or worse than in single parenting. In this, 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 between heterosexual parenting and single parenting in terms of outcomes – which is to say, well within socially accepted bounds. If we knew same sex marriages caused harm, we could see them as morally suspect; if we knew they were morally suspect, we would expect them to cause harm. But one point or the other has to be established independently.

Eleventh, and finally, Evangelicals argue that there is an ideal or pattern of marriage that is a general condition for human well-being, that this is heterosexual, and that this is something to which Christians in particular should be committed. The question of whether a same-sex marriage is something that God would view as marriage will be considered under my third heading (see below). For now I want to ask if the existence of a good heterosexual ideal establishes 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. To say that heterosexual marriage represents even a perfect and divine ideal does not preclude any number of sensible or even merely situational exceptions – a few biblical examples include celibacy (Jesus, Paul), Moses’ divorce laws (rejected by Jesus), “eunuchs from birth” (MATT 19:12, asexuals?), or the case of polygamy under the Jewish law (Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon). The obvious warrant for an exception in the case of same-sex orientation is that a person who actually lacks heterosexual attraction is already outside of any heterosexual ideal and we have no way to include them. A half-heterosexual marriage with limitations on intimacy and on mutuality, having one partner less far capable of romantic or sexual attraction to the other, is not itself the biblical ideal. So merely having a natural and divine ideal of marriage does not generate a moral condemnation for those who don’t conform to that ideal – especially for such a small proportion of the population.

#11

Conclusion. When we look at the biblical reasons for condemning same sex intercourse – all eleven of them – then we find that eight don’t apply at all, and those three that remain are unable to back up the biblical condemnations without the first eight to support them.

But if those last three reasons do not generate condemnations, then why do they appear in scripture as condemnations? The answer is reasonably obvious, that they augment the first eight reasons, even if they do not stand alone. The overwhelming majority of same-sex intercourse in the Greek and Roman world was an activity between heterosexuals that was unfaithful to marriages, perverted heterosexual desire, exploited the sexuality of young people for the pleasure of others, and more-than-arguably caused social harm. This was reasonably called unnatural, was socially harmful, and usually violated heterosexual norms of marriage in consequence of those reasons listed in my first category of eight. But same sex marriages, as we have seen, do not answer to these condemnations.

This overall argument will seem profoundly counter-intuitive to many of us. When Christianity first appeared in the Hellenistic world, its condemnations were clearly applicable to all the most publicly visible forms of same-sex intercourse. These were obviously immoral and abhorrent actions, so it is easy to see why Paul thought that gentiles would know that these things were wrong, and that they brought about legitimate shame and dishonour. Has scripture somehow changed? Clearly not: those things are still condemned. It’s just that our same sex oriented neighbours, in getting same sex married, don’t fall under those condemnations. Recognising this moves us a long way toward a better affirmation of scripture, condemnations included, and toward loving and understanding our same sex oriented family, friends and neighbours – or selves.

Evangelical concern that same sex marriage would be normalised, has usually presupposed that this would normalise immorality in the form of same sex intercourse. But if the biblical condemnations do not apply in this case, then there need be no

A Fifth Alternative for Evangelicals on Same Sex Orientation

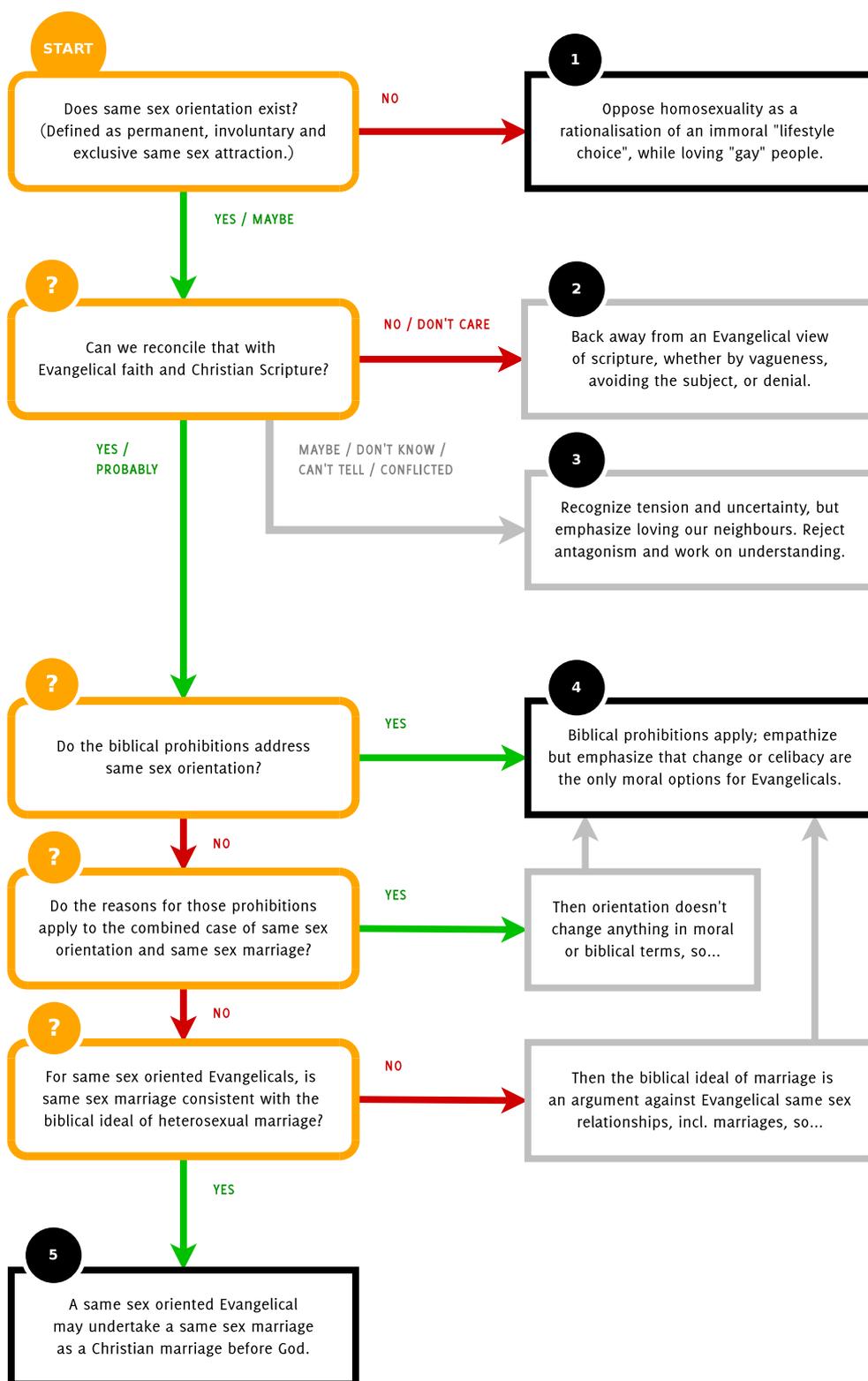


Figure 1: The argument of this paper is marked #5 on the flowchart.

moral concern about its normalisation for the small proportion of the population who are same sex oriented.

All of this explains why Paul could say that some in his Corinthian congregation had changed from being men who sleep with other men (*arsenokoitēs*, 1 COR 6:9), a change that he thought fitted well beside turning from fornication, idolatry, adultery, prostitution, theft, greed, and drunkenness. The great majority of Greeks and Romans who were involved in same sex intercourse were heterosexuals. And of course, it explains why modern Evangelicals have such feeble 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.

This conclusion carries deep, far-reaching consequences. Virtually all Evangelical practice and advocacy has been built upon a *prima facie* understanding that the biblical condemnations apply to all same sex relations. It is sometimes assumed, though clearly without historical perspective, that God would never have been so unclear on something so important as to let the church maintain a wrong idea over time. Yet, as we have seen, a same sex marriage between same sex oriented Evangelicals is not condemned *in any way at all* by scripture. There are limitations and complication that arise from the inability to have children by natural means, but these are practical and not moral differences. On the evidence of scripture, God does not think that same sex marriages are morally wrong. And if same sex intercourse is morally fine provided those involved are married, that would make it morally no different to heterosexual intercourse in heterosexual marriage. Which of course brings us to the other big Evangelical question: how could a same sex marriage be a true marriage in God’s eyes?

3 Does same-sex marriage fulfil the biblical ideal of marriage for same sex oriented Christians?

Does God think same sex marriage is really marriage, even if he doesn’t think that it’s immoral? (See above.) 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, “what God has joined together, let no one separate” (MATT 19:6). Or is that passage itself insurmountable, so that “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.” (19:4–5)

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. It may be pointed out, and quite correctly, that God in the Old Testament especially endorsed some violations of this pattern. Moses’ laws of divorce violated the requirement of lifelong faithfulness, and commonplace polygamy violated the requirement of monogamy. But Scripture emphasises the 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, Moses or David could have served as deacons in a Pauline house church, on account of their polygamy (1 TIM 3:12). The 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 once again suggests that reasonable exceptions do not undermine an ideal but, by being evident exceptions, reinforce it. We have seen by now that same sex marriage is not biblically immoral. But is it an exception to the ideal? Or is it even a fulfilment?

Someone who lacks heterosexual attraction is already outside any heterosexual ideal of marriage. We have no way to shoehorn them into the ideal: the most optimistic and selective studies made have not claimed a success rate better than one in six in changing orientation – think Russian Roulette with five celibacy bullets – and the general figures are very much lower than these, and may suggest no more than that some people can be attracted to both sexes, not that we can promise any individual that “change is possible.” (See my discussion in “Evangelical Churches and Same Sex Orientation” (<http://chapman.id.au/papers>)). Same sex marriages comprise a lifelong union of sexual and romantic intimacy, of care and companionship, of faithful monogamy, and the possibility of raising a family, which is to say, they fulfil every aspect of the biblical ideal that is actually possible in the permanent absence of heterosexual attraction. The alternatives of lifelong celibacy or half-heterosexual marriage, only sacrifice other aspects of that ideal, such as lifelong care and companionship, or sexual and romantic intimacy. In the absence of biblical and moral condemnations, same-sex marriages offer a better solution than either of those flawed alternatives. They may therefore be commended to same-sex oriented Evangelicals, and practised in Evangelical churches, and I propose we do exactly that.

We must ask, though: if same-sex marriage could be morally acceptable and even pastorally desirable now, then why not in the past? Surely there were same sex oriented people living in biblical times? 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, as I wrote above, 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. It was only in comparatively recent times that this has changed, and much 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. This has meant that many qualities 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, something as Christians we should welcome. Correspondingly, 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.

Conclusion

There are Evangelicals 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 efforts to change it, and more still from lifelong celibacy, but who see no way they could affirm a same sex marriage on Evangelical grounds. They are sure that ever acting upon orientation must be addressed by the biblical prohibitions, so that same sex intercourse could never be affirmed as morally good. And of course they are sure that the biblical ideal of marriage is solely heterosexual.

But as we have now seen, the biblical prohibitions did not address orientation at all; Paul’s statements in ROM 1 exclude that interpretation and they are decisive. Instead, we have had to find the reasons why same sex intercourse was condemned in scripture, and apply them to this situation. As we have seen, out of eleven reasons, eight do not apply to the combined case of orientation and marriage, while the other three don’t generate the biblical judgements of immorality and abhorrence without the first eight to back them up.

This, I suggest, is precisely why our public advocacy has been so unpersuasive in wider society: up against a moral argument about love and equality, we have had no moral argument to make – no simple “this is wrong because. . .”. Just fears, primarily,

about what might go wrong for children or families. Have we no moral argument in terms of common public values – things people who aren't Christian know already – just as Paul made his arguments? Shouldn't we be taking moral high ground in our advocacy? Whether we can depends on whether we can answer one important question publicly: Exactly why, and in terms that anyone could understand, is a same-sex marriage both immoral and abhorrent? The answer we have seen is that, on the basis of biblical morality, it is neither immoral nor abhorrent.

In the absence of a moral condemnation out of scripture, same-sex marriages for Evangelicals have to be judged against the biblical ideal. A same sex marriage fulfils every part of that ideal that is possible in the absence of heterosexual attraction: a lifelong union of sexual and romantic intimacy, of care and companionship, of faithful monogamy, and where possible raising a family. 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 even see them as 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.

I suspect 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 know some same sex oriented people they can talk to, in order to rebuild trust, and build their understanding and empathy. Our emotional and instinctive reactions are deeply ingrained, and can be tied to strong emotions. One of these is self-preservation and the well-being of one's family. A pastor in NSW could easily be sacked by their congregation for agreeing with this paper, so they will wish to be extremely confident before making a statement that in any way agrees with it. It simply won't seem possible to most Evangelicals that we have been so completely, confidently and collectively wrong on this issue, or to contemplate what turning around and seeking a community's forgiveness would involve.

Mistrust of gay and lesbian people, and their mistrust of us, can be overcome by listening first to people who have grown up same sex oriented in our church communities. Overcoming this mistrust is the current, pressing need. For their sake, for the sake of our own integrity, and for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have to openly address same sex orientation and marriage in our churches. Our Evangelical impasse over homosexuality has caused paralysis in interacting with the gay and lesbian communities, or, increasingly, with anyone who knows and loves them, while undermining basic pastoral care in our churches, and often leaving public statements to the most outspoken and the least informed. Our political agenda has alienated most same-sex attracted Christians, and sacrificed our reputation for compassion at every turn. If all this were a consequence of faithfulness to scripture and to God, then we should say so be it; this is not a popularity contest. But if the argument of this paper is correct, then we have done all that mistakenly, and even ignorantly. And where does that leave us? What did Jesus say to those who shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces? (MATT 23:13)

NC.