

Gay Sex for Evangelicals

Why gay sex is biblically condemned, and how this understanding solves the Evangelical impasse over same-sex attraction.

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Challenge.

This paper argues biblically on Evangelical principles that a Christian who is permanently and involuntarily same-sex attracted may undertake a faithful and monogamous same-sex union as a Christian marriage before God, with a clear conscience, and that a couple in a civil same-sex union can come to faith without breaking up their relationship or family. It will be thought by almost every Evangelical reader that no such argument can possibly be valid, and that there must be a mistake in this paper. Can you find one?

Synopsis.

A summary of this argument appears in the Introduction, pp. 4–7.

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Notes.

Although I am the Church Secretary of [Surry Hills Baptist Church](#)¹ in Sydney Australia, and have connections with a range of institutions, organisations and communities, this paper represents no-one's opinions or perspective but my own.

A brief word about my approach and background may be appropriate. I am neither a pastor nor an academic. I have a Master of Divinity degree and am the founding Secretary of a Baptist church in a 30% gay suburb of Sydney Australia. My intended audience is comprised of pastors and academics who identify as Evangelicals, and I will refer to my own Evangelical context from time to time. With this in mind I have adopted a classic prose style of writing as an accessible alternative to the dense, defensive style of academia, and will presuppose all the accepted canons of Evangelical thought and practice. My argument requires no starting point beyond this framework, so I will only now and then refer to other works.

To make review and criticism easier, I have used point numbering in the two largest parts of this paper, provided wide margins for notes, and formatted the paper as a 32-page booklet for anyone who wants to print them in that format. Please feel free to use and refer to these features. Your comments, critiques and corrections should be sent to Nigel Chapman, either by email at nigel@chapman.id.au or on Twitter via [@eukras](#)² or [#GaySexForEvangelicals](#).³

In the Australian Evangelical context, I suggest this paper be compared and contrasted with: *Revising Marriage? Why Marriage is the Union of a Man and a Woman* by Benson et al (2011),⁴ Chapter 4 of the findings and recommendations of the Australian Senate Inquiry into Marriage Equality (2012),⁵ La Trobe University's *Writing Themselves In 3: The third national study on the sexual health and well-being of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people* (WTI3, 2010),⁶ *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Homosexuality*⁷ (2012) and *Beyond Stereotypes: Christians and Homosexuality*⁸ (2009).

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1 <http://imagine.org.au>

2 <https://twitter.com/eukras>

3 <https://twitter.com/search/realtime?q=%23GaySexForEvangelicals>

4 "Revising Marriage? Why Marriage is the Union of a Man and a Woman" http://australianmarriage.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Revising_Marriage_pastors.pdf (24 May 2012)

5 "Senate Committees: Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2012", http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate_Committees?url=legcon_ctte/marriage_equality_2012/report/co4.pdf (25 June 2012), esp. ch. 4.

6 "Writing Themselves In 3: The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people." www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay/assets/downloads/wti3_web_sml.pdf (Hillier et al, 2010)

7 Eds. Michael Bird and Gordon Preece (Sydney: Anglican Press Australia, 2012).

8 Ed. David Clarke (Melbourne: Australian Evangelical Alliance, 2009).

9 To view a copy of this license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

10 Electronic Version: <http://chapman.id.au/papers>.

Introduction

“The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says...” ... The real question ... is whether we ... will be people of scripture, or people who deny what scripture teaches and expects of us.¹¹

This recent quote highlights the most foundational and the most widely shared conviction to be found in Evangelical writings on homosexuality: that the question of interpretation is resolved. I will argue in this paper that this consensus view is wrong. That, as Evangelicals, we have not developed a satisfactorily biblical understanding of same-sex attraction or of gay sex itself, and that, as a result, we have made fundamental, deeply damaging mistakes in mission and in pastoral care, and now find ourselves at an impasse.

My starting point is this: Without listening to people who are same-sex attracted we cannot understand “people like that”, cannot empathise with them, and certainly cannot go further and evaluate their experience biblically. No Evangelical writing that I have seen has achieved a satisfying, clarifying resolution of the issues, and I will be suggesting that our process of inquiry has faltered at the first gate, by not listening. In the first half of this paper I will aim to restore the empathy and understanding that I have found conspicuously absent in our most public pronouncements. In the second half I will ask new biblical questions on this basis, and produce both a constructive critique of our present consensus and a better and more biblical replacement.

In this paper I describe the life experience of young people who grow up same-sex attracted in our churches and the tensions which emerge for individuals and churches in this situation.¹² While I have no personal experience of same-sex attraction, those who have thus far read this paper with that background have in each case recognised their own experience described here. These tensions cannot be avoided in personal relationships, in community engagement or in counselling, where the life experience of same-sex attracted Christians and community members must be heard and acknowledged. Facing these tensions directly has posed exegetical questions that I have not yet seen addressed in our movement, yet which are able to resolve the issues.

The primary question is this: “Why is gay sex biblically condemned?” When you or I sit down with a gay or lesbian couple, say with two kids, what exactly are our concerns? Is their sexual relationship so obviously immoral that it should be justly thought abhorrent by that couple and by everyone they know? Isn’t that what we are saying scripture teaches?¹³ And if it so, can we express that persuasively? Have we a powerful and unifying moral message that will make the same self-evident appeal in church and in society at large? Or is our message only for ourselves? What, in short, should you or I say to that couple? To address that question, this study examines gay sex itself, biblically. This is prior and foundational to all associated questions.

Same-sex attraction is not an issue that any church can reasonably avoid addressing. Evangelicals have critiqued the old approximation that 10% of the population are same-sex attracted, but have generally accepted a figure of one-and-a-half or two percent.¹⁴ Some academics who have read this paper have directed me to higher percentages, but this is more than adequate to make a very fundamental point. That is 100,000,000 people globally – a multitude, from every nation, race and language. Only eleven *nations* are more populous. This is one in every sixty people in our suburbs, our youth groups and, if we are representative of our communities, in our adult

11 Michael Bird and Sarah Harris (quoting Luke Timothy Johnson), “Paul’s Jewish View of Sexuality in Romans 1:26-27”, in Michael Bird and Gordon Preece (eds.) *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Homosexuality*. Sydney: Anglican Press Australia, 2012. p.103-04.

12 See Pastoral and Missional Issues, p.8 and following.

13 See p.20 and following.

14 See p.9.

congregations too. Same-sex attraction in the church presents us with an urgent pastoral challenge, just as same-sex unions in society present us with an urgent missional challenge. These challenges are fundamentally the same: How do we evaluate the case in which same-sex attraction is both permanent and involuntary, and is (or wants to be) expressed in a faithful and monogamous union?¹⁵ This is the fundamental question which same-sex attraction poses, whether we are counselling same-sex attracted Christians, or seeing those in long-term same-sex unions come to faith. Accordingly, this is the case that I address in this paper.

How do we evaluate the case in which same-sex attraction is both permanent and involuntary, and is (or wants to be) expressed in a faithful and monogamous union?

The take-home lesson from the first half of this paper is that same-sex attracted Christians do not think they can talk about this in their churches. They 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 family if anyone finds out. This has often been exactly what occurs. As a result of this, they face up to same-sex attraction alone, online or elsewhere. This also means their churches do not hear what they experience, and do not understand it well enough to empathise. The average Evangelical will probably not know that 60% of same-sex attracted teens are conscious of this by the age of 13 or that the best-case success rates for ministries pursuing orientation change have not exceeded 15% and are certainly much lower in general.¹⁶ We might not know that same-sex attraction appears *instead* of heterosexual attraction in most cases, not in addition to it, although this is more frequently the case for men than for women.¹⁷ Evangelicals would not suggest that a person constitutionally lacking heterosexual attraction ought to undertake a *half*-heterosexual marriage. Living without sexual or romantic attraction to one's husband or wife, or being that partner, is certainly not the biblical ideal. Yet because no church or ministry has had even moderate success with orientation change, we find ourselves affirming lifelong celibacy as a core requirement of the Christian faith for something like one hundred million people. We have no effective way to bring them into the biblical ideal, and no biblical alternative to lifelong celibacy we can offer them. That is our present impasse, and most of what is wrong with our present consensus. This has wholly paralysed mission and pastoral care toward the gay community. I will argue that scripture itself breaks this deadlock, and in a relatively simple and obvious way, once observed. This requires that several insights click together.

Argument. → Had Paul been discussing same-sex attraction in the permanent and involuntary form that we must address, he would not have seen it as a gentile phenomenon, would not have linked it with idolatry, and would not have cast it either as a voluntary exchange or a progressive corruption. Thus Romans 1 demonstrably does not address orientation, and shows that Paul did not understand Leviticus 18 and 20 to address it either. Because all other references are made in passing, it follows that scripture as a whole does not address orientation.¹⁸ This observation changes the exegetical questions that we bring to scripture. To form a biblical analysis of something which scripture does not address, we isolate its underlying principles then reapply them. In the case of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction, we must determine *why* gay sex is condemned in the cases that scripture addresses, and apply those reasons to this case.

There are eight biblical condemnations of gay sex. They resolve into eleven supporting reasons, and these reasons then naturally fall into two groups of eight and three, respectively. I will call these Category A and Category B. This division is powerfully illuminating. It explains why gay sex is understood in scripture as a straightforward matter of manifest immorality and gross abhorrence, and why in contrast we are hesitant to argue that in public life today.

Category A. The first and largest set of biblical reasons address 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 the connection of such practices to false or

¹⁵ See 'Three Practical Scenarios', p.32.

¹⁶ See p.8 and following.

¹⁷ See p.9

¹⁸ See p.17 and following.

destructive worship.¹⁹ Collectively, these evils justify the sense of visceral abhorrence that underlies the biblical taboos and condemnations.²⁰ These were key issues in the biblical time-periods, and much of history, and they apply with undiminished force to analogous contemporary cases. But here's the thing: Not a single one of these reasons applies to the case of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction expressed in a faithful and monogamous union.

Category B. Others reasons clearly do apply: gay sex is contrary to a created heterosexual pattern and ideal, is condemned as unnatural in two passages, and, if it can be shown to cause social or individual harm, it is also immoral on those grounds.²¹ I will call these arguments "hetero-normativity, unnaturalness, and social harm" in shorthand. These condemnations are less direct than those in the first set, indeed, they don't convey the immediate abhorrence and self-evident immorality that are the grounds of the biblical condemnations. The arguments for social harm are simply unpersuasive, and the arguments from nature and hetero-normativity establish nothing more than deviation from a good and beneficial and desirable ideal – not moral guilt. Why then were these issues condemned in scripture? Because scripture did not address orientation, and the reasons in Category A condemn heterosexuals for betraying marital ideals, perverting natural desire, and causing major individual and social harms in doing so. They applied to the cases which scripture addressed. But when the reasons for the biblical condemnations are applied to the case of orientation, the Category A reasons vanish, and the Category B reasons, unassisted, are unable to substantiate the biblical judgements of abhorrence and immorality.

Either the scriptural judgements of abhorrence and immorality can be established using only hetero-normativity, unnaturalness, and social harm, or they cannot. And emphatically they cannot. Yet in the case of a permanent, involuntary same-sex attraction expressed in a faithful and monogamous union, these are the only biblical reasons that actually apply. If these cannot establish the biblical condemnations, then there are no biblical reasons that can. This means a case exists in which *gay sex itself* is not biblically condemned. And not some minor or marginal case, but the single most significant and central case we must address today, in church life and the public sphere.

Marriages. But let's go back a step. Even if gay sex is not biblically condemned in this case, is it nonetheless proscribed as fornication or adultery – sex outside of marriage – where marriage is intrinsically heterosexual?²² Same-sex unions of any kind lie necessarily outside of any biblical ideal of marriage, since everything called marriage in scripture is heterosexual. However, a person who constitutionally lacks heterosexual attraction is already excluded from that ideal. We would not suggest they undertake a *half-heterosexual* marriage to someone for whom they lacked sexual and romantic attraction. That is certainly not the biblical ideal. And since we have no generally effective way of changing any person's orientation, even in best-case scenarios, we cannot squeeze a given person into the ideal – much less a hundred million of them. If the arguments from Categories A and B are correct, then gay sex is not in itself morally wrong in this situation, and the only question is the biblical ideal of marriage. As a Christian disciple, is part of that ideal – the part that they can actually attain – better than none of it? It does not devalue an ideal, biblical or otherwise, to say that part of the ideal is better than none, especially when the whole of the ideal is unattainable. What aspects of the biblical ideal of marriage are actually possible for that person who lacks heterosexual attraction? "A monogamous ~~heterosexual~~ union of intimacy and lifelong faithfulness." These are still goods in the order of creation. Since an ideal is not in itself an obligation, since gay sex is not in the relevant case biblically condemned, and since imposed celibacy is not something everyone can accept, it follows that in this case, a faithful and monogamous same-sex union represents the biblical ideal better than lifelong celibacy does. In Evangelical theology, this would be understood as an exception to that ideal, like scriptural polygamy or the Mosaic divorce laws, unions which failed the biblical requirements of monogamy and lifelong faithfulness, respectively, but which were justified by circumstance, and which were certainly considered marriages by God.²³

19 See p.21 and following.

20 The final reason is effeminacy, though it is harder to argue that this is universally abhorrent or self-evidently immoral, so it will not appear in my summary lists (but see pp.21 and following).

21 See p.23 and following.

22 See p.28 and following.

23 See p.23.

Finally, if we maintain the same obligations for these unions as for heterosexual marriages – and what lesser standard could be warranted? – then we should understand these also to be marriages contracted before God, for life, and honour them in the exact same elevated terms as any other.

Conclusion. → This means that an Evangelical Christian who is permanently and involuntarily same-sex attracted could undertake a faithful and monogamous same-sex union, as a Christian marriage before God, with a clear conscience, and that a couple in a civil same-sex union could come to faith without breaking up their relationship or family.

I am as aware as anyone that this result will seem extraordinary if not impossible in a biblical and specifically Evangelical study. I started writing with the aim of finding a more compassionate approach to pastoral care and mission: what is now the first half of this paper. However, the conclusions I present have followed slowly but straightforwardly from the basic question put to us by the experience of friends, neighbours and family who are same-sex attracted. I do not expect that fellow Evangelicals will find these answers comfortable, nor that they will suddenly become so. This is, though, a biblical question, not a question of comfort. If any reader can identify some way in which this study has departed from the best principles and standards of Evangelical inquiry then I would be pleased to learn of that and to acknowledge and correct the problem. If not, we should accept these answers as scriptural and so, for Evangelicals, binding. This analysis is superior to our present consensus in several important respects. Mainly, it affirms and justifies the biblical condemnations on their own terms, and equally affirms and justifies God's love for any person who grows up same-sex attracted. It does so in a clear and simple way that anyone can understand. It thus resolves the major theological and practical impasse that has led to our paralysis in mission and pastoral care with the gay communities.

To answer my starting question: Why is gay sex biblically condemned? Because it is profoundly abhorrent and immoral in the cases which scripture addresses, and for the reasons which it gives. But as Romans 1 makes clear, the case we must address is different. When the reasons that establish immorality and abhorrence in the biblical cases are applied to permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction (orientation) and faithful and monogamous same-sex unions (gay marriage), then we see a clear and clarifying pattern: the reasons that condemn do not apply, and the reasons that apply do not condemn. Biblically, this case is not the good but unattainable ideal. But just as biblically, it's not a moral evil. We should stop treating it like one.

REFLECTION

If the argument of this paper is correct, then the truly sobering question will be how, as Evangelicals, we got these questions almost perfectly wrong. I think that fundamentally, amongst a raft of reasons, it comes down to not listening. Why listen when there was nothing we believed we could learn? We listened to political agendas, polarising rhetoric, hard-liners and social fears more than we listened to the people affected. Yet because we wouldn't listen to "those kind of people," we couldn't listen well to scripture when we had to. We had no options when we came to the impasse, and sometimes wore that as a badge of our commitment to biblical authority. We polarised the issues and stacked them with penalties. But our critical failures were biblical, pastoral and missional – failures that strike at the heart and soul of who and what we are. In time this will call for some searching reflection within our communities. For now, the way back must begin with repentance and conciliation.

Because no church or ministry has had even moderate success with orientation change, we find ourselves affirming lifelong celibacy as a core requirement of the Christian faith for something like one hundred million people.

Nigel Chapman
Darlinghurst, April 2013

Pastoral and Missional Issues

What are the primary issues presented to Evangelical churches by same-sex attraction and same-sex relationships?

1. 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.
 - a) 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.
 - b) We must find a validly Christian, Protestant, Evangelical and, in my case, Baptist approach, by which I mean one that integrates biblical theology, pastoral experience and missional care, without compromise. If this improves our political and ethical stance, that is good – but only of secondary importance. We must not politicise or polarise issues that are primarily pastoral and missional.
 - c) We must exemplify Christ's character and live out his mission in doing so.
 - d) 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.
2. **Key Point.** → Without listening to those who are same-sex attracted we can't evaluate their experience biblically, pastorally or socially.²⁴ 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.
3. 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.
 - a) By defining a series of Canaanite sins as abhorrent and detestable, Leviticus sets up a *deliberate taboo* around gay sex; 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," for example – but a taboo can only be distinguished from a prejudice by explaining its rationale.
 - b) Scripture itself does not always give reasons for what is wrong with gay sex, 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.
 - c) 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,

²⁴ I appreciate this emphasis in Barry McGrath's closing chapter of *Sexegesis*.

anger, revulsion and boundary maintenance, whether regarding gay sex as repulsive, or Christian churches as “haters”.

- d) 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.

Without listening to same-sex attracted people, we can't evaluate their experience biblically, pastorally or missiologically.

4. When I refer to a person who “grows up same-sex attracted in one of our churches,” I partly refer to a process of discovery over time. “Writing Themselves In 3” was a 2010 La Trobe University survey of over 3,000 “same sex attracted and gender questioning” 14–21 year old Australians.
- a) 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).
- b) 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.
5. I will use the figure generally accepted by Evangelical writers that between 1½ and 2% of the population are same-sex attracted.²⁵ Some of my academic reviewers have suggested higher figures, generally in the range of 3–5%, but the accepted figure is more than sufficient already to establish our obligations as churches.
- a) This figure 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.
- b) 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.
6. 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.

²⁵ 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.

7. **Experience.** 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 publicly articulated any reasons to believe that this would help.
8. 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 it's predecessor in 2004. These studies respectively surveyed 3,100 and 1,700 people aged between 14 and 21. No questions were asked on religious subjects, but in both surveys more than a hundred respondents mentioned religious involvement in their answers. How many of these stories could have come from *our* churches?

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

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

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

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

When i was going through the religious conviction it was very hard because i hated myself which is a lot harder 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)

9. 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, or that we haven't

helped these young people carry them. 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).

10. The motivation for attempting suicide 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.

11. 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:
- a) Significant diversity exists in human gender and sexuality, some of which, especially intersex, does not even resolve into male and female categories. 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.
 - b) 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*.
 - c) 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*

We must address the case in which same-sex attraction is both permanent and involuntary, and is expressed in a faithful and monogamous union.

about? Does she want to have kids? Who's that guy she's talking to? (Or make the appropriate gender substitutions.) 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, we have to imagine trying to reverse every such thought, and further imagine that everything we do and say has to be filtered and censored so that no-one can ever know this is happening, then facing this for years on end, alone. It should not surprise us if people crack.
- d) 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.
 - e) 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.
12. 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 possibly 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.”
 13. I assume in this paper 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.
 14. **Change.** Many churches expect that a same-sex attracted person will change their orientation then get married. To Evangelicals this is almost axiomatic: gay sex, as a sin, must fit a common-sense Evangelical model of sin and repentance in which every sin is a free choice, corruption of desire only results from past sin, repentance leads to change, and freedom from sin leads to a happy and fulfilled life. So it follows naturally that “ex-gay” or “reparative” therapy should exist and should be effective.
 15. Attempts to change orientation are 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, and that apparent changes only indicate degrees of bisexuality in some people.
 - a) The general understanding amongst professional psychologists is that “efforts to change sexual orientation have not been shown to be effective or safe.”²⁶ Against this background –
 - b) 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

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

very rare. 11% of those he interviewed reported achieving a complete absence of same-sex attraction. He retracted his findings in 2012, however, 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.”²⁷

“How do the gay people in your church know that it’s safe to come and talk to you?”

Matt Glover

- c) 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 – it’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.
- d) 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.”²⁸ He added that Exodus needed to “move beyond” its slogan *Change is possible*. The movement experienced a fracture over these statements in 2012.
- e) 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 *Sexesis* (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).²⁹

But this optimistic tone is lost completely if we are bound 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).

- f) In *Sexesis*, 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

²⁷ Quoted [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Spitzer_\(psychiatrist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Spitzer_(psychiatrist)) (Accessed: 25 Aug 2012)

²⁸ “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)

²⁹ John E. Hartley, WBC: *Leviticus* (Word Books: Dallas, 1992), p.300.

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.

- g) 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.
16. **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.³⁰

- a) My discussion of the practical effect of celibacy should not be taken to prejudge the biblical questions (beginning on p.17), but rather 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 woman who cannot find a suitable husband?
- b) The WTI3 data showed that 60% of same-sex attracted youth were aware of this attraction by the age of 13; that means that Christian teenagers who are same-sex attracted will have usually spent several years trying to change their attraction by the time anyone else becomes aware of it. They are likely to have a good idea about their odds of changing: probably not 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.
- c) 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.

³⁰ Quoted in “NSW Baptists and same sex marriage” <<http://rodbenson.com/2012/06/19/nsw-baptists-and-same-sex-marriage/>> (19 Jun 2012).

- d) Sexual desire does not define who we are, and is to be subordinate to our reason and will. All the same, it can seem 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 demanded (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.
- e) 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.
17. 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 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.
18. When churches determine 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

Missionally, the church needs to be able to justify its position, and show itself to be both coherent and caring.

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 10?

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.

19. The witness of our churches is presently severely compromised by our public positions, both real and assumed, toward the members and interests of the gay communities.
 - a) 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 online. 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.
 - b) 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 (cf. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp.289–91).
 - c) 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).
 - d) 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. ■

Biblical Evaluation

The preceding discussion of pastoral and missional issues has been a portrait of Evangelical imperatives in tension: the biblical on one hand and the pastoral and missional on the other, leading to paralysis. Because these are also biblical imperatives, Evangelicals who are sacrificing them are in a state of compromise.

1. This discussion is Evangelical in its methods and assumptions, and presupposes familiarity with the eleven most relevant chapters of scripture: Gen 2 and 19; Lev 18 and 20, Jdg 19, Mark 10 and Mt 19, Rom 1, 1 Cor 6, 1 Tim 1, and Jude 1.
2. **Key point.** → The major case to which we must presently apply the biblical prohibitions on gay sex is the case in which a permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction is expressed in a faithful and monogamous union. This covers the key issues of mission in the context of civil same-sex marriages, and the expectation of celibacy in the context of Christian pastoral care.
3. The Bible's treatment of homosexuality fits a common-sense Evangelical model of sin and repentance in which sin is always a free choice, corruption of the will only follows from past sin, and repentance is expected to result in positive change. Those Paul talks about in Romans "exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural" (Rom 1:26) in a conscious, voluntary and culpable exchange. Knowing such acts to be worthy of judgement these gentiles "not only do them but even applaud others who practice them" (v.32). Some of Paul's Corinthian congregation members appear to have repented from a list of sins including homosexual relations (*arsenokoitēs*, see below): "And such were some of you..." (1 Cor 6:11). But this doesn't match our present pastoral experience of a typically permanent and involuntary orientation, with changes to or from being uncommon at best. How then are we to apply the scriptural prohibitions to our situation?
4. The biblical references to gay sex establish that scripture does not contemplate or address the case of involuntary and permanent same-sex attraction:
 - a) As noted above, the prohibitions refer to something chosen voluntarily, from which repentance is expected to be primarily a matter of decision. In pastoral experience same-sex attraction is in many cases neither chosen nor apparently changeable. Hence Evangelicals have typically distinguished between the attraction and the action.
 - b) The scriptural prohibitions, especially in Romans 1, understand gay sex to be progressively corrupting. Yet, if a person is same-sex attracted all their life, this desire is neither progressive, nor a corruption, nor is it a consequence of previous sin. Nor, since it is not a progressive corruption, would it predict or entail any general or ongoing degradation of character. Paul's language of "shameful passions" or "degrading lusts" (*pathē atimias*, Rom 1:26), does not seem to apply either, as a person cannot accrue shame any more than they can accrue guilt for something they have not themselves chosen. Not before God, at least, who judges fairly.
 - c) In scripture gay sex is first a Canaanite abomination involving men (Leviticus), then a Hellenistic degradation involving men and women (Romans). It is foreign to a Jewish person in both cases, establishing that scripture does not address this as a universal human experience. This is standard Second-Temple Judaism: "We are quite separated from these practices." (*Letter of Aristeas* 152). But of course same-sex attraction affects both men and women, and both Jews and Gentiles, in our society.

- d) In Romans, compelling gay and lesbian desire was a degrading *consequence* of gentiles suppressing the knowledge of God through idolatry: God “gave them over” to these passions (*paredōken*, v.26). But same-sex attracted youth in our churches have not become so by worshipping idols, nor by suppressing their knowledge of God. Equally, our secular neighbours have likely had no experience with idolatry. Efforts to link homosexuality with metaphorical idolatry – I think of Gordon Preece’s reference to “homosexual victims of a sexually idolatrous world,”³¹ – are a hermeneutic stretch to say the least. Nothing in Romans suggests victim-hood but rather culpability, that even Gentiles *knew* that “those who do such things deserve to die” (v.32).
- e) If Romans 1 did not address orientation, this implies that Paul did not understand Leviticus to be addressing it either. These are the two key passages, since all other references are made in passing. We therefore have no reason arising from scripture itself to believe that any part of it addresses orientation, let alone in the context of faithful same-sex unions, the case that we must now address.
- f) Michael Bird and Sarah Harris have argued from common-places of Hellenistic literature and culture that Paul would have been aware of “life-long homosexual relationships”, “social, psychological or biological factors” affecting homosexuality, and “philosophical apologies for homosexual love and homosexual acts.” It thus becomes significant that he “makes no concession for certain types of homosexuality nor does he mitigate his remarks by careful qualification.”³² But as I have already shown, had Paul been discussing same-sex *attraction* in the form we must address, he would not have presented it as a gentile phenomenon; would have not have linked it with idolatry, and would not have cast it either as voluntary “exchange” or progressive corruption. So he categorically does not address the same phenomenon that we must, and we thereby know that his cultural background did not compel him to do so, whatever views he might have come across. The issue is not “claims that the ancient world knew nothing of consensual, caring, same-sex relationships or nothing of people whose sexual desires were exclusively same-sex”³³ but whether Paul’s comments show him to be addressing the same situation that we are. His statements establish that he is not.
- g) *Must* Paul have necessarily addressed all cases of gay sex, or otherwise offered some “careful qualification”, given the scriptural status of his letters? Because scripture as a whole makes no such qualifications, we need not suppose that the scriptural nature of Paul’s letters would have compelled him to do so.³⁴
5. The fact that scripture does not address same-sex attraction as we encounter it (or may indeed experience it) could take us in two directions: We could say that orientation was not a factor in Paul’s thought, though it is in ours, and that we are thus to improvise without scriptural guidance. Or we could ask the exegetical question, “for what *reasons* was gay sex condemned in scripture and how do those reasons apply to the question of orientation?” I will understand this second approach to be the correct Evangelical response to the question, and use it as the basis of this study.
6. The scriptural condemnations are found in, or based upon, eleven biblical chapters:
- a) Genesis 2, Mark 10 and Matthew 19 establish heterosexual marriage as a norm and ideal for human life.
- b) Genesis 19 and Judges 19 use gay sex, through the threat of gay rape, to graphically depict the sinfulness of two communities. This illustrates how worthy of judgement Sodom and Gomorrah were, then how anarchic and debased Gibeah became in premonarchial Israel where “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (cf. 18:1,

³¹ *Sexegesis*, p.34.

³² *Sexegesis*, p.97–98.

³³ Preece quoting Larry W. Hurtado, in *Sexegesis*, p.57.

³⁴ However, in light of the Levitical death penalty, the subsequent history, and divine foreknowledge, this raises a raft of theodicy questions that deserve a paper of their own.

19:1, 21:25). In Jude 1:7 these cities “serve as an example by undergoing a judgement of eternal fire.”

- c) Leviticus 18 lists six Canaanite sins which are to be abominated by Israel: numerous forms of incest, the strange case of sex with a menstruating woman (see below), adultery, child sacrifice, same-sex intercourse between men, and bestiality. These are called ‘abominations’ or detestable things, and the majority are still considered so in society. Leviticus 20 adds death penalties, including one for same-sex intercourse between men. Turning to Paul, while he does not expect Gentiles to obey Jewish laws, he knows and quotes to them the Levitical codes (e.g. Lev 18:5 LXX in Rom 10:5 and Gal 3:12, and Lev 19:18 LXX in Rom 13:9, paralleling Jesus), so that major reversals would seem to require special comment.
- d) Romans 1 parallels and connects the Gentile rejection of true worship with their rejection of “natural” sexual relations, so that “even their women” did such things, while “men committed shameless acts with men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.” As in Genesis and Judges, gay sex is used to *exemplify* degradation and corruption; in this case, a debasement and corruption of the will that followed from Gentiles suppressing their knowledge of God through idolatry.
- e) 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 contain standard vice lists that include “male prostitutes” once (*malakoi*, or the effeminate) and what was formerly translated “sodomites” twice (*arsenokoitai*). These are set beside “the lawless and disobedient, . . . godless and sinful, . . . unholy and profane” who “will not inherit the kingdom of God”. *Malakos* has a range of meanings in classical lexica, though BADG notes only softness, as in clothing (e.g. Lk 7:25) and “pertaining to being passive in a same-sex relationship.” Paul’s use of *arsenokoitēs* in 1 Cor 6 is the earliest known, so it lacks contemporary parallels, and it is possible the word at first carried some connotation now lost to us. But the circumstantial evidence is substantial and unopposed, so that the lexicon meaning remains considerably more probable. From subsequent usage BADG notes that “male prostitutes’ NRSV is too narrow a rendering; ‘sexual pervert’ REB is too broad,” rather it is “a male who engages in sexual activity w[ith] a pers[on] of his own sex.” The word follows the pattern of *doulokoitēs* and *mētrokoitēs*, one who has sexual relations with their slave or mother, respectively, and it plausibly derives from the Septuagint: *Arsenos* (male) and *koitēs* (bed) appear in both Lev 18:22 and 20:13 (LXX), and are adjacent in the latter, suggesting a Jewish-Hellenistic origin consistent with the first occurrence known to us being in Paul’s letters.
- f) The prohibition of male same-sex intercourse in Lev 18 does not seem to be undermined by the parallel ‘abomination’ of eating shellfish in Lev 11:10, or the strangeness of condemning sex with a menstruating woman also in Lev 18. There’s a larger background issue here, but for the purpose of this paper I can take a shortcut: the food laws generally, the significance of literal blood or the the whole concept of ceremonial ‘cleanness’ are deliberately obsoleted in the New Testament and do not factor in Christian theology. On the other hand, the prohibitions on incest and adultery and gay sex are explicitly applied to gentiles; and though bestiality and child sacrifice are not mentioned, that only seems to indicate their social decline. Lev 18 itself is book-ended by notes that the Canaanites were judged by the same standard as Israel in regard to their six main sins (see 6.c, above), so these were never specific to Israel, nor were they subsequently limited to just the Ancient Jewish context.
7. **Key Point.** → To say *that* gay sex is biblically condemned is different from saying *why* it is biblically condemned – and of course it explains nothing to say that it is (or should be) self-evidently wrong. Pastorally, the church needs to understand the reasons *why* gay sex is scripturally condemned if we are to apply those condemnations to questions which

There is hardly a more foundational Christian teaching than this: that lovelessness cancels out every single virtue we possess – including ostensible holiness.

scripture does not address. Missionally, too, our churches have to be able to justify their position, and show themselves to be both coherent and caring.

- a) Scripture does not in every case give reasons when it condemns gay sex.
 - b) In the case of the New Testament, they are presumably to be read as, in part, reaffirmations of the Holiness Code in Leviticus.
 - c) However, this immorality and abhorrence is also presented as self-evident.. Key terms appear without explanation in vice lists, and in Rom 1:32, gentiles are expected to know that the actions condemned earlier in that chapter are worthy of judgement. This may also be implicit in Leviticus where the six Canaanite sins from which Israel are being separated are given as a reason for judgement, implying culpability. (But these passages are discussed in more detail below.)
8. We may summarise that scripture condemns gay sex in eight respects: as abhorrent, socially shameful, unnatural, harmful to individuals, immoral, ungodly, compulsive and possibly also harmful to society.
- a) **Abhorrence** is seen in the ‘abomination’ language of Lev 18.
 - b) **Shamefulness** is like abhorrence, but affecting honour or status. This appears especially as “shameful passions” or “degrading lusts” (*pathē atimias*) in Rom 1. .
 - c) **Unnaturalness** appears in Romans and Jude (through a somewhat interpretive translation of “strange flesh,” *sarkos heteras*, in the second instance), but the underlying rationale is not identified in either passage. Hellenistic Jews thought about nature in some ways as we do, but in other respects very differently. Unnaturalness may be implicit in the language of perversion, which implies natural purpose (cf. p.23).
 - d) **Individual harm** is envisaged by Paul’s comment that Gentile homosexuals “received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.” (Rom 1:27, although this is seen as a ‘penalty’ rather than a moral concern, it may still envisage ‘natural justice’ or consequence; also implicit in Jewish background texts, on which see below.)
 - e) **Immorality** is assumed throughout the biblical references, but is especially apparent when gay sex appears in vice lists like 1 Cor 6 or 1 Tim 1. Having raised the subject, Paul presumably includes the immorality of gay sex in the universal moral knowledge he ascribes to Gentiles in Romans 1.
 - f) **Ungodliness** includes immorality, but also includes the higher standards and obligations of piety and worship. It is implicit in the repeated linkage of gay sex to divine judgement in the Old and New Testaments, and especially in its connect to false worship in Leviticus and Romans. It may additionally be implicit in the normativity of heterosexual marriage as a specifically *divine* institution.
 - g) **Sexual compulsion** is a feature of Romans 1; those concerned were “given up” to dishonourable passions (v.26) and ‘were consumed’ with them (v.27). That is, rather than living self-controlled and responsible lives, even by pagan standards of temperance, they became the slaves of their own desires.
 - h) **Social harm** is a prominent concern of Hellenistic Jewish writers from the first century (and of our contemporary campaign against same-sex marriage), but is difficult to establish scripturally. It may be suggested, however, by the way that cases of gay sex are given as the ‘*sin qua non*’ that exemplifies the social failure of two cities in the Old Testament, of Canaanite society in Leviticus, and of gentile society in Romans.
9. Abhorrence, shamefulness and judgement in themselves do not identify *why* gay sex is condemned, though they dramatically underscore the importance of the condemnation. The remaining condemnations show eleven different underlying reasons. These naturally

fall into two categories of eight and three reasons respectively, which in a fit of creativity I will call Categories A and B.

10. **Category A.** Our most important pastoral and missional question, exemplified in the Three Practical Scenarios on p.32, is what to make of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction when it is expressed in a faithful and monogamous union. A significant number of the reasons for which scripture condemns gay sex are not applicable to this case and can be set aside from the start. (A summary table appears on p.27.)
- a) Associations with Canaanite practices including male temple prostitution in Deut 23:17; 1 Ki 14:24, 15:12, 22:46; 2 Ki 23:7, or relationships with Hellenistic idolatry, are not directly relevant to our contemporary situation. (Though note that the gay sex was condemned for being a sin, not merely for being associated with false worship.)
 - b) Likewise for prostitution of any kind.
 - c) The “unnaturalness” of effeminacy in Hellenistic culture was most exemplified by its distinctive styles of homosexuality and the disgust that long-haired and soft-skinned men evoked, in opposition to Roman ideals of masculinity (cf. Paul’s terms, *malakoi*, for the soft or effeminate, or 1 Cor 11:14, “Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him”). Today, of course, the great majority of gay relationships exhibit no such tendency, nor would it be thought strictly immoral if they did (but see the discussion of “unnaturalness”, p.23).
 - d) Sexually transmitted diseases seem most plausibly what Paul had in mind in referring to a “penalty” that homosexuals received “in themselves” (Rom 1:27). The symptoms of syphilis alone could easily account for Paul’s language here.³⁵ This would mean that Paul was referring to a consequence that could be seen as natural justice. It would have been shared by promiscuous heterosexuals, though that does not seem to weaken his point. But diseases arising from promiscuity are not an issue in faithful and monogamous relationships. While male homosexuals do have a higher average rate of STD infection, so that the Red Cross does not allow sexually active gay men to donate blood, that infection rate is indexed to promiscuity, not to homosexuality *per se*.
 - e) Threats of gay rape appear in Gen 19 and Jdg 19, where moral and social failure is exemplified by violent exploitation in the place of lawfully and culturally mandated hospitality. This has no relevance to monogamous same-sex relationships today.
 - f) Gay sex is listed with fornication and/or adultery in Leviticus, 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. It carries the same penalty as these in Leviticus 20, and can be categorised as a kind of fornication (non-marital sex), as Aquinas did in *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.122. But a faithful and monogamous gay union is, of course, neither promiscuous nor unfaithful, which is what we condemn when we apply these terms to heterosexual cases. The question of legitimate marriage is addressed further below.
 - g) While addiction to consuming passion is emphasised in Romans (also see the Philo quote below which links illicitness and obsession), this is nowadays no more or less a feature of same-sex unions than it is of heterosexual marriages.
 - h) Paul condemns a *progressive corruption* of heterosexual desire in Rom 1: Men and women “exchanged” the natural sexual order for one that was unnatural. This progressive corruption does not occur in cases of permanent and involuntary attraction, where a person has never experienced a heterosexual orientation, nor then perverted it.

Because our pastoral and missional imperatives are also biblical imperatives, Evangelicals who are sacrificing these are in a state of biblical compromise.

³⁵ The skeletons of twins with congenital syphilis were discovered in excavations of Pompeii in the 1980s; see e.g. “Pompeii skeletons reveal secrets of Roman family life” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11952322> (14 Dec 2010).

11. Certain ideas may provide relevant background for the New Testament prohibitions, though we may never know to what extent they informed them.³⁶ Philo of Alexandria thought that Leviticus 18 and 20 referred to pederasty (*On Abraham* 135-136, cf. Josephus *Antiquities* 1:200), though Paul's expression "men with men" in Rom 1 uses *arsenos*, literally "male" with male, and so does not limit his statements in that way. Philo and Pseudo-Phocylides express Hellenistic concerns about the "unnaturalness" (to the *male* nature) of a man taking a passive or feminine role in sexual intercourse. The concept of gay sex as an exploitative, humiliating power relationship typically refers to male-to-male intercourse, though Lucian of Samosata gives a lesbian example in *Mimes of the Courtesans*. These ideas are missing from the Bible, but were surely well known to Roman slaves in the Pauline churches. A short passage from Philo shows how other Jews discussed these issues at that time. He has just reached Lev 18:22 in his discussion:

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...

12. *Summary.* The reasons thus far discussed seem to apply with undiminished force to analogous contemporary cases, and to carry the same sense of visceral repugnance and self-evident immorality that we find expressed in scripture. These cases include prostitution, promiscuity, adultery, 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 to false worship (I omit effeminacy from this list as it is discussed further below). The critical point is that none of these reasons apply to anyone in our Three Practical Scenarios (p.32), because they don't apply to the case of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction expressed in a faithful and monogamous union.

³⁶ For this kind of background, see Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

13. **Category B.** But three scriptural reasons for condemning gay sex *certainly* apply to our contemporary questions. These are the arguments that gay sex is contrary to a created, heterosexual norm, is scripturally deemed unnatural, and is argued to cause social harm.

- a) *Hetero-normativity.* The ungodliness of same-sex relationships can be argued from a universal divine imperative toward heterosexual marriage based on Gen 2, Mark 10 and Matt 19.
- Second-Temple Judaism held that every man and woman ought to marry and multiply. Paul's contemporary Philo wrote that "All true servants of God will fulfil the law of nature regarding the procreation of children,"³⁷ and this is the view of the later Mishnah as well: "A man shall not abstain from procreation unless he already has [two] children."³⁸ However, Jesus and Paul repudiate this by unmarried lives and express teaching (Matt 19, 1 Cor 7).
 - Much contemporary writing refers to heterosexual marriage as a "divine plan," "foundation and ideal,"³⁹ or "design." This terminology is vague and lacks biblical grounding, but that is not its primary failing. Most problematically, there is nothing in the idea of a general plan, a social foundation or a good and entirely desirable ideal that makes it a universal imperative. An ideal does not preclude reasonable exceptions, nor does it condemn those who do not or cannot measure up to the ideal. Otherwise we would call it an obligation or imperative, a 'creation mandate' or simply a command, rather than a 'plan' or 'ideal.' This may be relevantly illustrated by the many scriptural exceptions to the scriptural ideal of marriage: polygamy (examples too numerous to mention, but see esp. Num 12 where Moses takes an extra wife), marriage as a punishment for rape (Deut 22:28-29), Jesus' categorisation of Moses' divorce laws as his own innovation given "for your hardness of heart" (Matt 19:8), being a eunuch or a "eunuch from birth" (Matt 19:12), possessing a special gift of celibacy (1 Cor 7:7-8), and avoiding earthly difficulties (1 Cor 7:26-28), amongst possible examples.
 - A *half*-heterosexual marriage is certainly not the biblical ideal. Should someone who constitutionally lacks heterosexual attraction undertake a heterosexual marriage? I suggest that the correct answer was yes in both the biblical time-periods, but that Evangelicals would not answer yes to that today. Marriage is much less a question of economic necessity now, and the biblical ideals of romance and sexual intimacy are better expressed today than they ever were in biblical times; we would see such a marriage as failing the requirement of intimacy and so intrinsically unfair to either the husband or wife. If a person is permanently and involuntarily same-sex attracted, then they are already outside of the general heterosexual "plan" or "ideal" of Gen 2, Mark 10 and Matt 19, and we have demonstrated no generally effective way to fix that. I discuss the related question 'Unions or Marriages?' on p.28, after having completed the study of gay sex itself.
- b) *Unnaturalness.* Rom 1 and Jude 1 together describe gay sex as "contrary to nature" (*kata physin*) in pursuing "different flesh" (*sarkos heteras*) though they do not say why this was wrong. There seem to be five main ways to argue that gay sex is unnatural:
- Unnaturalness could mean going against God's design in creation, of which human procreation is of course an integral part. This is a restatement of the previous argument from a heterosexual ideal, but with 'nature' representing that ideal.

A person who constitutionally lacks sexual and romantic attraction to the opposite sex is already excluded from the biblical ideal.

³⁷ Philo, *De praemiis et poenis* 108, though he also holds to a Stoic-influenced ideal of contemplation that is arguably at odds with such statements.

³⁸ m. Yebamoth 6:6.

³⁹ This is the terminology of the 1995 and 2009 Baptist World Assembly resolutions on marriage.

- Unnaturalness could mean going against the obvious interoperability of the male and female reproductive organs; in this sense gay sex is 'unnatural' because it does not fulfil the reproductive purpose of sexual organs and is consequently barren. The appeal to barrenness was a mainstay of the classical and extra-biblical Jewish traditions, but does not feature in scripture.
- Unnaturalness could be inferred from expected or actual damage to individuals, families and societies, on the assumption that harmonious unity is a characteristic of well ordered nature. The analogy of "sexual ecology"⁴⁰ draws upon environmental imagery in which the breakdown of complex created systems leads to catastrophic problems, and blame falls upon those neglecting their Christian stewardship of the natural order. There exists a 'natural unity' of love, marriage, sex, procreation, family, and life companionship in ideal heterosexual families, whereas the natural infertility of same-sex relationships leads to complications and concerns as a result of reproducing by other means, and the absence of male or female parents risks developmental issues for children raised outside a 'natural' environment. This is the predominant theme of contemporary arguments against same-sex marriage: that there is an ideal heterosexual norm and that transgressing it carries a clear risk of social harm.
- Unnaturalness could refer to the act of perverting natural sexual desire. This is an argument that we know Paul uses, because it takes centre-stage in Romans 1 itself: "their women *exchanged* natural relations for unnatural" (v.26), "the men gave up the natural use of the woman [*literal trans.*] and were *consumed with passion* for one another, men committing shameless acts with men," "receiving ... the due penalty for their error" (v.27). Because the idea of perversion of natural desire coheres with the direct condemnation of immorality in Rom1 and Jude 1, this is the dominant sense of the term 'unnatural' in those passages. It does not preclude the other understandings just listed, but is certainly present in Paul's thought in Romans, while this cannot be demonstrated for the other ideas.
- Unnaturalness could refer to transgressions of masculinity and femininity. Nothing in scripture directly parallels Philo's "man-woman who adulterates the precious coinage of his nature" (quoted above), or the Hellenistic concern with males being dishonoured by a passive role in intercourse. However, understanding gay sex as specifically unnatural *for a man* or *for a woman* solves the puzzle (to the modern mind) of how an aspect of nature could be strongly linked with shame – especially with males being perceived as deficient in manliness, or women lacking femininity.

Now, if the dominant sense of nature is a design that represents a divine ideal, then we have simply underscored that a general plan or ideal neither establishes a universal imperative, nor precludes reasonable exceptions. If the dominant sense of nature is a harmonious system that can break down through neglect, with harm resulting, that is discussed below under 'Social Harm' (13.c). Otherwise, these concepts of unnaturalness may be evaluated as follows.

- If the dominant sense of unnaturalness is the *perversion* of desire ("exchanged natural relations for unnatural") then we have only reinforced that Romans did not address same-sex attraction in the primary form that we must address in ministry today; that is, the case in which same-sex attraction is permanent and involuntary, and has never been deliberately perverted.
- The concept of 'naturalness' is morally ambiguous. Same-sex attraction is certainly 'naturally occurring' for a certain proportion of the population, and for these people heterosexual attraction does not in any sense 'come naturally.' But

⁴⁰ e.g. Gordon Preece "(Homo)Sex and the City of God: Sexual Ecology Between Creation and New Creation" in *Sexegesis*, pp. 25-47.

ambiguity exists in all arguments from nature, because natural facts cannot supply moral judgements. We can't get an ought from an is. And, of course, much of being human, civilised and Christian means opposing or deliberately transcending what is merely "natural".

In the language of Matt 25, how we treat those who are same-sex attracted is nothing more or less than how we treat Jesus Christ himself, and he invites us to consider being judged by this standard.

- The parallel connection of 'nature' with social shame in 1 Cor 11:14 provides a cautionary argument *against* using a biblical appeal to nature to establish a universal moral principle. "Does not *nature itself* teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him?" Most Evangelicals would honestly answer no to this question, despite recognising that it is a rhetorical question expecting the answer yes. Because our own understanding of nature does not tell us anything of that sort, it seems most likely that Paul referred to a view of nature, or of male nature particular, that was a discredit to the church in first-century Hellenism, but which has no such effect today. The case of masculinity and femininity appears identical: we don't, from nature, understand sex in active and passive gender roles, or link masculinity or femininity with heterosexuality. Nothing precludes a gay man from being masculine, or a lesbian woman from being feminine.
 - Other than the argument for perversion, none of these arguments are connected in scripture itself with the idea that gay sex is unnatural, so they have only the status of theories about scripture. Only the argument for voluntary perversion is compelling, and it does not apply to same-sex attraction is life-long.
- c) *Social Harm*. If gay sex can be shown to be harmful in the case being considered then that would argue for its immorality. To reiterate, the case we are addressing is that of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction expressed in a faithful and monogamous union; this being the major question posed by same-sex marriage in society and the expectation of celibacy for same-sex attracted Christians.
- The concern that gay sex is destructive to society features in biblical background texts (see the Philo quote, p.22, for instance), but cannot be definitely established in scripture. Threats of gay rape are used to exemplify social failure in Gen 19 (Sodom) and Jdg 19 (Gibeah); Leviticus seems focused on preventing issues which affected Canaan from affecting Israel; and a social judgement may be implicit in the condemnation of Hellenistic sins in Rom 1. But the emphasis in each case falls directly on the abhorrence and immorality of the action *itself*.
 - Jim Wallace of the Australian Christian Lobby made headlines in 2012 for comparing the 'gay lifestyle' unfavourably with the effects of smoking, in protest at which, the Australian Prime Minister withdrew from speaking at the ACL annual conference. He said, "the homosexual community's own statistics for its health ... are that it has higher rates of drug-taking, of suicide, it has the life of a male reduced by up to 20 years",⁴¹ whereas the life expectancy of smokers only declines by 7–10 years. His statistics were criticised for partly pre-dating effective HIV treatment in the 1990s, but the existence of a substantial difference is undisputed. However, these concerns are inapplicable to faithful and monogamous unions and so may be regarded as socially solved by them. Disease is indexed to promiscuity, while factors such as drug-taking, suicide and promiscuity itself are attributable to causes other than same-sex attraction or gay sex *per se*. For example, the first part of this study linked abuse and alienation (including that in our own churches) with depression and suicide. The solution to Wallace's concern is that Christian communities should love and help the gay community, within the church and

41 "Smoking healthier than gay marriage" <http://www.theage.com.au/national/smoking-healthier-than-gay-marriage-20120905-25eca.html> (5 Sept 2012).

without, rather than literally leaving them to die. We need to recognise, however, that they have more than made do without us, and are likely to reject our help on principle because of how we have treated them.

- Worse outcomes have been argued for gay-parented families. This has led to lobbying claims that “Research shows that a child with a married, biological mother and father do best.” and “Children should be given the chance to start life with both their biological parents.”⁴² However, this is not a demonstration of active harm, or even of greater disadvantage than occurs in, say, single parenting. Having one gender, but two care-givers, would make a same-sex marriage the better option of the two, although single parenting is ideally a temporary state. It may be a concern that children will be exposed to a homosexual relationship in the home, yet that begs the question that we are discussing: is that case in fact abhorrent and immoral? Gay parents are not less loving or committed than others; if anything, having children is a much more intentional choice. It is likely that social experience with gay parenting will raise practical issues, but a supportive church community should be the healthiest possible place to help with those.
 - The issue of greatest concern that I have seen is an exploitative market for third-world surrogacy created by some Western gay male couples. Having one’s own biological child means nine months access to a woman’s womb, and the poverty of third-world surrogate mothers combines with the financial interests of the brokers to create conflicts of interest. This issue, however, does not characterise the whole gay community, and may be something on which Christian and gay activists could work together. Having seen themselves as a marginalised minority all their lives, the gay community are in my view better and more widely attuned to social justice issues than Australian Evangelicals are.
14. *So why are the Category B issues condemned in scripture?* The overall pattern of the scriptural references is best explained if scripture addressed itself directly to the Category A issues that once predominated in society: prostitution and pederasty, rape and exploitation; promiscuity and unfaithfulness (thus fornication and adultery); the propagation of disease; intemperate compulsion; and a progressive corruption of heterosexual desire that reinforced the other problems. These were in fact abhorrent and immoral actions, which fit with a common-sense Evangelical understanding of sin and repentance. They imply the Category B reasons because, by not addressing orientation, they also condemn heterosexuals for unnaturally perverting God’s ideal and for causing individual and social harm in doing so. But when the reasons for these condemnations are applied to orientation today, the Category A reasons vanish, and the Category B reasons on their own cannot establish the judgements of abhorrence and immorality: the Category B reasons only condemn when addressing the Category A issues.
15. **Two options.** The preceding evaluation of the Category B reasons should allow us to decide whether or not the arguments from hetero-normativity, nature and social harm suffice to establish the biblical prohibitions against gay sex in the case we are considering. I will frame this as a choice between two options: either #1 they do or #2 they don’t.
- a) *The common ground.* Both of the options I will outline are grounded in a detailed Evangelical study of scripture. Both affirm a scriptural, heterosexual ideal of marriage. Both options address gay sex directly, so they precede and pre-empt all other questions. Both agree that that scripture finds gay sex abhorrent and immoral in the cases it addressed, and for the reasons it supplies, and both hold that most of those reasons are timeless and grounded in God’s nature, though some addressed the consequences of specific historical practices that no longer exist. Both observe that scripture does not contemplate or address permanent and involuntary same-sex

42 “Have your say on the Future of Marriage” <http://www.acl.org.au/2012/03/have-your-say-on-the-future-of-marriage/> (1 March 2012)

Two Categories of Biblical Reasons for Condemning Gay Sex	
Category A	Category B
Does not apply to the case of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction, expressed in a faithful and monogamous union (see p.18).	Applies to the case of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction, expressed in a faithful and monogamous union.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promiscuity or unfaithfulness (i.e. fornication or adultery). 2. Prostitution, including temple-based. 3. Association with false worship. 4. Effeminacy (linked with prostitution and pederasty, intrinsically shameful in NT social context). 5. Individual harm, e.g. risk and effects of sexually transmitted diseases. 6. Rape and exploitation (threats in Gen 19, Jdg 19, pederasty in NT context). 7. Compulsion and intemperance: 'consumed with passion'. 8. Progressive corruption of sexual desire that reinforces outcomes 1–7. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Contrary to a created pattern or ideal. 10. Declared unnatural (Rom 1, Jude 1). 11. Argued to cause social harm (other than that in Category A).
Self-evidently immoral and viscerally abhorrent (though #4 is complicated).	Neither self-evidently immoral nor viscerally abhorrent.
Implies Category B.	Does not imply Category A.
Condemns but doesn't apply.	Applies but doesn't condemn.

Table 1. A comparison of the Category A and Category B reasons (pp. 21 and 23).

attraction. Both agree that our most important pastoral and missional question is presented by permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction expressed in a faithful and monogamous same-sex union. Both note that most of the scriptural reasons – the Category A reasons that most clearly justify abhorrence, immorality and judgement – are inapplicable to this case, on their own terms. Both agree the arguments which do apply are those from nature, hetero-normativity and social harm. The two options diverge on whether and to what extent the biblical condemnations can be established using just the arguments from nature, hetero-normativity and social harm: Either we find these arguments condemning (Option #1), or we don't (Option #2).

- b) **Option #1: Condemning.** In this case we conclude that most or all of the biblical condemnations of gay sex – that it is abhorrent, shameful, unnatural, harmful, immoral, ungodly, obsessive-compulsive and possibly bad for society (p.20) – can be reconstructed using only the arguments from nature, hetero-normativity and social harm. To whatever extent these arguments are considered sound, they will mean that life-long celibacy is expected of any permanently same-sex attracted Christian in contemporary society, and that the expression of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction in a faithful and monogamous same-sex union is immoral, abhorrent and

damnable. This option is broadly consistent with the approaches that Evangelical churches have taken thus far.

- *Advantages.* No plausibly Evangelical alternative has been thought to exist, so that this option has held the biblical high ground. “We know what the text says,” as I quoted earlier, and the “real question” is “will be people of scripture, or people who deny what scripture teaches and expects of us?”
 - *Disadvantages.* We have tried this already and it has left us with the pastoral and missional problems detailed in this first part of this paper (Pastoral and Missional Issues, p.8), and crippling paralysis in justifying and commending to our peers either the biblical condemnations of gay sex, or God’s love toward the same-sex attracted person.
- c) **Option #2: Non-Condemning.** In this case we conclude that the arguments from nature, hetero-normativity and social harm do not suffice to establish the biblical judgements of immorality and abhorrence. An Evangelical church or Christian could hold on Evangelical grounds that these three arguments are wholly without merit; are uncertain or disputable; establish only a qualified deprecation instead of a blanket condemnation; do not preclude a reasonable exception to the ideal; or are simply too weak to justify the damage they cause to the pastoral and missional obligations that are also Evangelical imperatives. This conclusion is strongly inconsistent with the public statements and private convictions of many Evangelical churches and Christians. But if these three arguments, the ones that actually apply, do not condemn the case we are considering, there are no others which can do so. This leads to a genuinely radical conclusion: that gay sex – in the specific case of permanent and involuntary same-sex attraction expressed in a faithful and monogamous union – is not in fact scripturally condemned as abhorrent, shameful, unnatural, harmful, immoral, ungodly, compulsive or socially damaging. This does not make it part of the biblical ideal; rather it would rank with singleness and celibacy as a situational exception to that ideal. It may be that many of us (and I address my fellow heterosexuals here) may never shake off a gut-reaction that gay sex is skin-crawlingly creepy, even if we are completely persuaded by the argument of this paper. But as Evangelicals we work biblically: if this case is not biblically condemned then it follows that Evangelical Christians who are permanently and involuntarily same-sex attracted may freely and gladly and in good conscience form faithful and monogamous same-sex unions.
- *Advantages.* This is a genuinely Evangelical alternative to Option #1, with, I suggest, better biblical credentials. It allows scripture itself to resolve our urgent practical concerns. It justifies and commends the biblical judgements on their own terms, preserves the biblical ideals of marriage, and cuts through a Gordian knot of pastoral and missional challenges.
 - *Disadvantages.* Merely discussing this proposal will be intensely controversial and disruptive. Going further and adopting it will necessitate a public reversal of policy, and will require us to seek reconciliation (e.g. change the 2012 NSW&ACT Baptist Constitution, p.7, under ‘ethical misconduct’), and to think through the social justice implications of this change.

16. **Unions or Marriages?** But there is one further and very important question to consider. Even if gay sex is not biblically condemned in the main case that applies to same-sex unions, as we have seen: – Is it still in practice precluded for Christians by the restriction of sex to marriage, that being what happens when “a *man and woman* covenant to live together in a life-long relationship of love, fidelity, companionship, and devotion to each other.”⁴³

43 A 1995 statement by the NSW Council of Churches, adopted by the 1995 NSW & ACT Baptist Assembly.

- a) The only marriages that scripture contemplates are heterosexual. However, a person who constitutionally lacks sexual and romantic attraction to the opposite sex is already excluded from any ideal that requires heterosexual love and intimacy, as the biblical ideal does. This is probably reflected in Jesus' comment about "eunuchs from birth" (Matt 19:12). We would not suggest that someone who was same-sex attracted should form a half-heterosexual marriage with a partner with whom they were not capable of sexual and romantic desire (see p.23). Because we have no reliable means of changing any person's orientation, even in best-case scenarios (see p.12), we can't do anything to patch them into the biblical ideal – at least not the whole ideal. Though scripture deprecates imposed celibacy (see p.14), this has been expected because of the twin convictions that gay sex is biblically condemned and that change is possible. On these premises, the biblical ideal of marriage is attainable for all concerned. But in the case of permanent, involuntary same-sex attraction we have seen that gay sex is not biblically condemned (see Option #2, p.28) and that change is only rarely possible, which is to say that the biblical ideal is in most such cases unattainable. For each person the question of a same-sex union is a choice between *some* of the biblical ideal of marriage – monogamy, intimacy, and lifelong faithfulness – or none of it. It in no way devalues an ideal to say that most of it is better than none, especially in cases where the whole ideal is actually unattainable.
- b) Should we oppose calling such a union a "marriage" *in civil society*? If we acknowledge that, biblically, gay sex is not in fact immoral in this case (see Option #2, p.28), then there is no reason for Evangelicals to withhold honour from such unions in society, or to deprecate them on moral grounds. The natural fertility advantages enjoyed by heterosexual unions are plain for all to see, so that there is no need to try and avoid confusion by having different names for gay and straight unions. That distinction mainly reinforces the enduring marginalisation that same-sex attracted people have experienced in our society for the longest part of its history.
- c) Should such a union be called a "marriage" *in Christian theology*? We have seen that, for someone permanently and involuntarily same-sex attracted, a faithful and monogamous union is not biblically condemned. But neither, mainly on account of natural infertility, is it biblically ideal. Is such a union a Christian marriage? Does every theological right, privilege and responsibility apply to every Christian undertaking such a union, and is that to be celebrated in our churches? May we say, "What God has joined together..." as one flesh? There is certainly scriptural warrant for calling a marriage something that only meets a section of the biblical ideal. Scriptural polygamy violated the requirement of monogamy, and Moses' laws of divorce violated the requirement of lifelong faithfulness (see p.23), yet in each case the unions which followed were still called marriages. Both those cases were exceptions to the ideal, and are now deprecated, but is there any doubt that they were understood by God to be true marriages? Do same sex unions present a directly analogous exception to the ideal? In the absence of a binding moral condemnation, I suggest that we should understand two Christians making such a union to be contracting before God to fulfil every aspect of the biblical marriage ideal that is in fact possible for them to fulfil. They should be held to the same standards and given the same support as a heterosexual couple. But if we do that, then we are already understanding their union to be a Christian marriage before God, and ought to recognise the honour that deserves.
- d) *Generalising this result.* I suspect that a similar analysis will hold for any other question of the form "Can a lesbian or gay Christian do *x*, *y* or *z*? That is to say, once it is granted that there is no applicable biblical and moral condemnation for the case being considered – altogether, one last time: "the case of permanently and involuntarily same-

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

Ezekiel 34:4

sex attraction, expressed in a faithful and monogamous union” – every major question stands resolved. Polygamy was a leadership disqualifier in the Pauline churches (1 Tim 3:2,12), which I understand in context (v.2) as keeping its leaders above all avoidable social reproach. There may be situations where this is relevant for church leadership today, but generally, the biblical and moral issue has to take priority. It seems to follow that a consistent Evangelical approach to same-sex marriage entails no disqualifications from ministry, be they moral or otherwise, in this case.

17. **Conclusion.** In *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, Stanley Grenz identified the fundamental question as this: “Is it proper for Christians to respond to homosexual urges by forming same-sex unions?”⁴⁴ Under Option #1, the answer is No. Under Option #2, the answer is Yes. While I think an Evangelical could conscientiously hold to either position, I have argued that Option #2 is far superior across the full spectrum of biblical, pastoral and missional considerations. It does not change the nature of marriage as a biblical ideal, but recognises one more reasonable exception to that ideal for a small but significant proportion of the population. Heterosexual marriage remains obviously ideal, though being ‘less than ideal’ does in no sense whatsoever indicate moral inferiority. Gay sex in the Category A cases remains abhorrent and immoral, for the reasons given.
18. Two anticipated responses:
 - a) *That is not an acceptable Evangelical conclusion.* – I have thought this. Let me suggest that it may take six months or more to come to terms with this idea, even if you find its biblical credentials faultless, and only then if you seek out and talk to same-sex attracted Christians whom you respect about their experience. But having asked the question “Why is gay sex biblically condemned,” there is nothing to be gained by rejecting the apparently biblical answers as unpalatable, unpopular, politically unwelcome, or demanding humble reconciliation. Discomfort and unpopularity is not much of an argument. Being Evangelical means that unless this paper can be faulted on biblical grounds it is not only acceptable but binding. As noted, of course, I welcome any corrections or critiques via the email address on the cover of this document.
 - b) *What if someone **GOES TO HELL** because of Option #2?* – I expect that for some readers this question will persistently intrude on all others until it is addressed. The concern is that gay people in faithful gay unions will have actual gay sex and be condemned for it. If the arguments advanced in this paper are evangelically sound then this issue does not arise. Let’s be perfectly clear as Evangelicals that canonical scripture is the only rule of faith. Hell amplifies all moral questions, but these should still be answered clearly and not be blown around by vague fears. Firstly, what is heaven or hell? It is the expectation of perfect justice on the basis of God’s perfect character. If your concept of hell, or of God’s judgement generally, is not an expression of perfect justice then you don’t have a Christian concept of hell, and must consider that as a separate, preliminary question.⁴⁵ Our question is why, or in what cases, gay sex deserves just condemnation? Scripture has not, as we have seen, addressed orientation; we must determine why scripture condemns the cases that it does address and then apply those reasons to this question. This paper has followed that argument through. The reasons which clearly justify the judgements of immorality and abhorrence don’t apply to the case before us. The biblical reasons that do apply – the arguments from nature, heteronormativity and social harm – do not suffice to show that gay sex is abhorrent, immoral and damnable in the case we must address. Do your homework, and if you conclude that there are no applicable scriptural condemnations, then do not live in fear of any. Let me turn the question around, though, and ask you this: What if someone goes to hell, exactly as you understand it, because you leave this question unresolved? Our Evangelical impasse over homosexuality has caused a deep paralysis in engaging

44 Grenz, Stanley J. *Welcoming but not affirming?* Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p.155.

45 See for example, William Crockett (ed.) *Counterpoints: Four Views on Hell*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

with the gay community or anyone who knows and loves them, and has greatly undermined both mission and pastoral care in our churches. Our political agenda has alienated most same-sex attracted Christians, and has sacrificed our reputation for compassion at every turn. If that is a consequence of faithfulness to scripture and to God, then so be it; this is not a popularity contest. But if the argument of this paper is correct, then we have this mistakenly. 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) ■

Three Practical Scenarios

In addressing the issues raised by same-sex attraction in an Evangelical context, the following representative scenarios are proposed as reference points for discussion.

- **Dave** → Suppose that 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, are a serious 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** → Suppose 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 also open to Dave, who has not been through the same experience?
- **Kim + Jen** → Suppose 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, and start 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 the results of your survey (see 'Dave')?