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Blog article <http://arestlessfaith.com.au/blog/how-the-unthinkable-might-become-thinkable/>

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## How The Unthinkable Might Become Thinkable

For many Christians, the idea that they might ever support same-sex marriage seems unthinkable. The chasm over which they would need to jump appears too wide; the beliefs they would need to jettison too important, the fear they might fall into an irreversible moral relativism too frightening. This, for many, is a make or break issue, going to the very heart of their faith. A major reason for this is that the Bible seems so consistently clear in its condemnation of sexual union between people of the same gender.

Although there are only a small number of references to same-gender sex in the Bible,[1] there can be little doubt about their negative evaluation of this practice. How then can Christians ever think otherwise? How could they ever say 'Yes' to same-sex marriage? In this article, I will explore the possibility of the unthinkable becoming thinkable.

Consider the following 5 observations:

1. Most Bible-believing Christians feel free enough to disregard, or to re-interpret, or to re-appropriate at least some Biblical prohibitions. For example, Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibits women from wearing men's clothing and men from wearing women's clothing, describing this practice as abhorrent or as an 'abomination' to God. This is certainly not complied with, at least strictly, by today's Christians. In 1 Corinthians 11:14, Paul describes long hair on a man as 'unnatural' (the same word as used of same-gender sex in Romans 1). But Christian men, certainly those who lived through the 70s, do wear their hair long; and women their hair short - a practice described by Paul as 'disgraceful' in 1 Corinthians 11:6. Although neither of these practices (of dress or hair length) are as morally significant as having sex, they are examples of where we disregard and/or re-interpret seemingly straightforward Biblical imperatives,[2] whilst seeking to find and be guided by underlying Biblical principles.

2. The Bible is not always uniform or consistent in what it says about things. It has an unfolding dynamism in many of its articulated beliefs and practices. Promises that are understood literally in the early stages of the Bible are later re-interpreted in metaphorical terms. A whole raft of purity laws are over-turned in an instant by Jesus; worship in a Temple is superseded by worship in the Spirit; the command to keep the Sabbath is re-interpreted, and so on. Just because something is believed or practiced at one point in the Bible's unfolding story does not mean that it is to be believed or practiced later or forever. New experiences and new understandings would often lead to the earlier Scriptures being re-read and re-appropriated.

3. Included among beliefs and practices that have been modified or discarded within the pages of the Bible are ethical or moral practices and beliefs, associated with patriarchy, for example. Biblical writers, to a man, assumed the appropriateness of husbands having power and authority over their wives. In Old Testament legislation involving husbands and wives, wives were considered the property of men, with very few rights and almost no power. However, Jesus and Paul subverted patriarchal beliefs and practices, applying gospel principles to this assumed social practice, thus setting in train a process that would, in time, lead to its demise,[3] as was the case with slavery.

4. There are other beliefs and practices which are not modified or rejected within the pages of the Bible, but which we now have modified or rejected. Historically, there has been a succession of such modifications and rejections. It might be helpful to elaborate a little:

4.1 The Protestant Reformation was noted for its decision to restrict its attention to the literal or straightforward meaning of Biblical texts. Previously, those seeking to understand the Bible looked beyond the literal meaning, in part because of problems they encountered with a literal reading. There were good reasons for this adjustment at the time, but it has created problems - especially when wedded to a doctrine of inerrancy which asserts the literal truth of Biblical propositions. Luther, the pioneer of the plain sense (*sensus literalis*) approach, encountered early difficulties in his reading of Genesis 1-3. While acknowledging the fable-like nature of these early chapters, he nevertheless reasoned, 'Although it sounds like a fairy tale to reason, it is the most certain truth. It is revealed in the word of God, which alone impacts true information' (*Lectures on Genesis 1.123*).

4.2 By restricting themselves to the literal or plain sense meaning of texts, the Reformers lost the wherewithal to take issue with the text or to find alternative ways of reading it, a problem that the early church fathers did not share. St Augustine, for example, was quick to take a non-literal reading of the early chapters of Genesis. He also counselled against interpreting the Biblical text literally if it contradicts what can be known from science and our God-given reason.[4]

4.3 Through adhering to the plain sense of Scripture, Luther and the other Reformers were quick to dismiss Copernicus, because, as they rightly saw, a heliocentric universe conflicts with a literal reading of the Bible. Melancthon described Copernicus's theory as 'pernicious', and added, 'It is a part of a good mind to accept the truth as revealed by God and to acquiesce in it,' (*Initia Doctrinae Physicae*, quoted in Sparks, *The Sun Also Rises*, 114).

4.4 In the years since Luther and Copernicus, discoveries of all sorts have created challenges for Christians who have stuck with Luther's plain sense reading of the text. The discovery of the New World changed people's understanding of the antiquity and spread of human civilisation creating insurmountable problems for those trying to harmonize these discoveries with the literal sense of the Bible. Not only is the world much older than a plain reading might suggest, so also are human civilisations. Older still is the lineage of *Homo sapiens*, with implications for theology.

There are a number of important points to draw from these examples. The first is that a plain sense or literal reading of the Biblical text can, and has historically, got Christians into trouble. Those who continue with this approach often fail to realize, or acknowledge, its past failures. In accepting a heliocentric view of the universe, or its great age, or that evolution in

some form has happened, they have implicitly rejected a literal or plain sense understanding of the text. In practice, if not in theory, they have followed Augustine in submitting to reason and science by adopting a non-literal reading of the text.

A second point to draw out is that in accepting these discoveries, Christians thereby lose the moral and intellectual authority to insist on a literal approach to other matters, including sexual ethics.[5]

A third point is that cosmological assumptions implicit in the text of Genesis 1-11 are ubiquitous throughout the rest of the Bible. They permeate the New Testament as much as the Old, with the implication that just because something is written or implied in the New Testament does not mean that we will agree with it.[6] We might not.

The implication for our topic is clear. Though the Bible is consistent in its condemnation of same-gender sex, this, in itself, is not a conclusive reason for saying we cannot ever legitimately think otherwise.

5. The major reason Christians are re-thinking the issue of same-gender sex, and, consequentially, same-sex marriage is that discoveries in the area of biology and genetics have precipitated this re-think, as have the brave testimonies of increasing numbers of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people. Although we still have a long way to go in understanding why it is that between 3 and 6% of all human populations are GLBTI, it is becoming increasingly clear that homosexuality is best understood as an orientation, which is as resistant to change as heterosexuality is in 94% to 97% of the rest of the population. For most people, homosexuality is not something they choose, and it is certainly not something they can repent of or be cured of.[7]

This emerging understanding is new. None of the biblical writers would have been aware of this information, certainly not in these terms. Richard A. J. Gagnon, of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, marshals evidence to show that people in the ancient world *were* aware of entrenched homoerotic tendencies known to be resistant to change,[8] which, perhaps uncomfortably for the conservative Gagnon, is evidence for the existence and persistence of homosexual orientation throughout history. However, what is new is our emerging understanding of the genetic and biological origins of homosexual orientation. The ancients lacked the conceptual wherewithal to differentiate, as we now can, between a homosexual and a heterosexual. As Richard B. Hays has pointed out: 'The idea that some individuals have an inherent disposition towards same-sex erotic attraction and are therefore constitutionally "gay" is a modern idea of which there is no trace either in the NT or in any other Jewish or Christian writings in the ancient world.' [9] This understandable lack means that there is conceptual room to move in both plotting new ways forward and in understanding the Biblical prohibition against same-gender sex.

As I understand the relevant Biblical passages, the reason same-gender sex was prohibited was that it was seen to violate natural and God-created boundaries in perverse and damaging ways. God created males and females, and this clear distinction needed to be honoured and safeguarded. The breaching of these boundaries was evidence of degenerate and God-denying behaviour.[10]

This makes sense of the relevant passages, but it does not fully account for the experience and emerging understanding of contemporary Christians and others. It is this new knowledge which has created scope for a re-think - as has the Bible's open-ended dynamism, referred to above.

For reasons such as these, I, for one, have begun to rethink the previously unthinkable. The chasms over which I've had to jump aren't as wide as I would once have imagined.

This has not been the experience of everyone, however, and so it might be useful, before concluding this article, to articulate some commonly urged objections to an approach like mine.

**Objection 1:** Such an approach undermines Biblical authority. To argue, as I have done, that the Biblical writers were wrong or, at least, not fully informed, is to undermine confidence in the authority of the Bible.

**Brief response:** I agree that this does raise the issue of Biblical authority. In fact, it is one of the good things about this issue; it forces Christians to do the hard work of understanding the nature and extent of Biblical authority. For example, do the doctrines of inerrancy or infallibility make sense of what we find in the Bible? Do they open up or do they obscure the Bible's meaning and significance? I personally think the latter, but this is a discussion evangelicals need to have. I have made a few tentative suggestions for a way forward in my recently published book, *A Restless Faith: Leaving fundamentalism in a quest for God*. I have also been helped by Jürgen Moltmann's Trinitarian model of inspiration, which he describes as a 'hermeneutics from below,' in contrast to Karl Barth's 'hermeneutics from above,'<sup>[11]</sup> but I would love to hear other suggestions.

**Objection 2:** It is arrogant to suggest that we might know better or more than Paul and/or the ancient Israelite legislators.

**Brief response:** arrogance is something we need to avoid, but it is not only a temptation to those who come to more liberal conclusions on this issue. One can be arrogant in resisting conclusions that evidence makes more and more likely, or in persisting with unsustainable ways of reading the Bible.

Moreover, it is possible, even in coming to new and stretching conclusions, to be humble in one's approach to both the Bible and contemporary knowledge. All truth is God's truth, and so we must be willing to submit to truth whenever we are reasonably persuaded of it. In this way, we submit to God.

Furthermore, it is not necessarily arrogant to think that we know more than Paul in some matters, just as he knew more than those who wrote before him, in very large part because of his encounter with Jesus. There are things we know he did not know.

That being said, it is still hugely important to do our very best to understand what Paul and the other Biblical writers were saying about this topic, to understand, if we can, the rationale behind the Biblical prohibitions. By doing this, we find principles that will guide us to better understandings and better practice. Even if, as a result of this investigation, we conclude that the gender divide isn't quite as neat as was once thought, we are still likely to want to understand and honour the Biblical concern to not violate boundaries in perverse and damaging ways, which leads to one final objection that I have often heard.

**Objection 3:** If we allow same-sex marriage, there is nothing to prevent us from going on to allow adultery, paedophilia, bestiality or any other variation of sexual or marital activity. This, I guess, is the moral slippery slope argument.

**Brief response:** I can think of any number of good reasons to resist and/or abhor such practices, not least of which is the gospel itself with its inherent high valuing of human dignity and worth. As Christians, we are well served by principles of love and honour drawn from all parts of Scripture, including the passages that prohibit same-gender sex. We also have the wherewithal to observe the terrible impact of sexual aberrations including paedophilia, rape and incest; not only on victims, but perpetrators as well.

Crucial to any elaborated case for same-sex marriage is careful attention to the likely impacts on GLBTI people, as well as the wider society. One would need to be convinced that this will contribute to the good health and flourishing of everyone concerned, including children.[12]

### Conclusion

To draw all this together, it may be that we will need to re-think some of our cherished beliefs, about Biblical authority, for example. Accepting, or even countenancing, same-sex marriage will entail all sorts of new challenges as we come to better understand our gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex sisters and brothers, as we adjust our understandings and emotions to what will, necessarily, be a slightly different form of marriage, with its own unique challenges no doubt, but my major point is that this unsettling possibility need not be unthinkable.

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[1] 7 passages appear to speak directly to the topic: Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9 and 1Timothy 1:10.

[2] They are also suggestive of what might be in the minds of Biblical writers when they prohibit same-gender sex.

[3] Or, at least, emasculation.

[4] See, for example, 'The Literal Interpretation of Genesis' 1:19-20; 2:9.

[5] I may be wrong, but it seems to me that very few, if any, Christians are consistent in following the plain sense approach, even when issues of genre are factored in. Creationists come closest. The new Principal of Moore College, Rev. Dr Mark Thompson indicated to me that he believes himself to be consistently literal, and illustrated this by resisting the conclusions of most contemporary geologists in affirming the worldwide nature of Noah's flood, which is certainly true to a plain sense reading of Genesis 6-9. Whether Mark is right or wrong on Noah, he can with some integrity insist on a plain sense reading of other texts, including those texts that prohibit same-gender sex.

[6] To mention just a few examples, we are unlikely to be able to take the genealogies at the beginning of Matthew or Luke as accurate accounts of the human family tree. We are also likely to be at least quizzical about the ability of Satan to find a mountain high enough to show

Jesus 'all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour', or about 'stars' falling from the sky in the Olivet Discourse prediction. Less obvious, perhaps, are New Testament references to Adam and Eve, Cain, Abel, and Noah which we are now more likely to believe are mythical characters. Their stories almost certainly contain mythical elements, some of them implying a cosmology we no longer accept, some of them added to in the New Testament, such as in the case of Noah entering the underworld to preach to the departed spirits of those who disobeyed in the days of Noah in 1 Peter 3:19, 20.

[7] For an interesting and poignant story to illustrate challenges faced by someone who is intersex, see: <http://www.journalonline.co.uk/Magazine/57-8/1011507.aspx#.UTAiFFfLtSw> This article also contains a disturbing account of how quickly patriarchy re-asserted itself thereby reversing the revolutionary gains initiated by Jesus and Paul.

[8] R.A.J. Gagnon, 'The Faulty Orientation Argument of Anglican Archbishop Harper of Ireland' in *Fulcrum: Renewing the Evangelical Centre*, at <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=325>, see also R.A.J. Gagnon, 'Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful' in R.E. Saltzman (ed), *Christian Sexuality: Normative and Pastoral Principles*, 2003, 106-55.

[9] Richard B. Hays, 'Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14/1 (1986), 200.

[10] For an elaboration on this, see my two sermons: 'Homosexuality and the Old Testament', and 'Homosexuality and the New Testament', at <http://arestlessfaith.com.au/blog/>

[11] See, for example, J Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, 2000.

[12] From my admittedly brief consideration, it appears that research in this area is still in its infancy. It is too often polarised around conflicting ideologies. We do have ample evidence to show the distinctive and complementary importance of fathers and mothers in the parenting process, and of the deeply felt need of children to know who their biological parents are. As we increase our understanding of the distinctive strengths and challenges faced by GBTLI parents this will need to feed in to a sophisticated and hopefully calmer discussion of how we as a society can best meet the needs of children. It is worth noting that what research has been done is suggesting that children can thrive very nicely indeed within the present range of parenting possibilities. Variety can be deeply enriching if handled well. As grandparents, my wife and I have come to see how joyous and important that complementary role can be.