**Same-sex intimate unions**

**Mark D Thompson**

1. **The critical nature of the current debate**

Once again the issue of same-sex intimate unions is in the headlines. Voting on yet another Bill to bring about a change to the Marriage Act (1961) in Australia is imminent — this follows failed attempts in February 2010 and September 2012. In an astonishingly short period of time, the homosexual lobby in its various guises has managed to gain an even more astonishing degree of support world-wide. Following the decriminalisation of homosexuality (Britain 1967, Canada 1969, USA 1962–2003, Australia 1972–1997), the government of nation after nation has voted to recognise intimate unions between two people of the same sex as ‘marriage’, often legislating a change in the definition of marriage to accommodate such a recognition (Netherlands 2000, Canada 2005, Germany 2013, France 2013, Britain 2013, Ireland 2015, United States 2015).

The supporters of these changes insist that this is an issue of fundamental human rights — the right to marry the one I love — and of equality. The slogan that has been used with most effect in the campaign in Australia is ‘marriage equality’. Just as racial equality was the great cause of the mid-twentieth century, and gender equality similarly in the late twentieth century, the time has come for marriage equality. It is presented as the great civil liberty issue of our time. Listen to the speeches of the advocates — the stakes are very high indeed.

Which is of course why they cannot tolerate any dissent. They will not allow the arguments against them to be put without challenge or without interruption. To them, all such arguments are simply immoral. Those who oppose the modification of the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex intimate unions are decried as ignorant, intolerant, or both, the last vestige of traditional bigotry and religious oppression. As one television panellist put it, they’re just ‘brain-dead’. This also explains why the campaign has continued well after the legislation has been passed in various countries around the world. Changing the definition of the word ‘marriage’ has proven to be too small a goal in the end. The legitimisation of this lifestyle and behaviour, acceptance and the end of criticism, the silencing of dissent—from
whatever quarter it may come—are the bigger and more important goals. Unsurprisingly, then, in those places where the definition of marriage has been changed, antidiscrimination legislation has been used to punish and silence those who voice a conscientious objection. No conscientious objection can be tolerated because all people of good conscience are committed to freedom and equality. Witness the recent proposal of a high profile UK politician, an aspirant for the Labour leadership no less, that ‘faith schools must be forced to teach about gay and lesbian relationships on a par with heterosexual couples’.

The danger is, of course, that if no dissenting argument is allowed to be heard and the reasons for conscientious objection are not seriously engaged, we can delude ourselves into thinking there are no coherent arguments and no cogent reasons. It is possible to present this change as both necessary and inevitable and even to suggest it is a change that can be made without any adverse consequences at all. But how can we be sure that is the case if we do not listen—seriously and sympathetically listen—to the voices of dissent? Even the assumptions that this issue is about the deepest levels of personal identity, about justice and equality, then remain just assumptions—unexamined and so unproven.

It is too easy, and not a little lazy or intellectually dishonest, to point to the shrill voice of the fundamentalist—the ugly slogans of hate in some of the protests in America, for example—and suggest this is what all opposition to the change is like and so we do not need to listen to any of them. But there have in fact been numerous calm and carefully reasoned arguments raised against the proposed changes. Many have raised significant concerns about such a redefinition of marriage and its consequences. Some of these concerns have indeed arisen from the context of religious conviction and Christian faith. They are often dismissed out of hand, before the rigour and evidential base of their arguments can be assessed. The slightest hint of religious faith renders a person incapable of rational argument, or so it would seem. Others have arisen in an entirely different context, from people who are committed to a secular worldview but who nonetheless see dangers with such a significant shift in one of the basic building blocks of human society. These are simply ignored. In between, some men and women of faith have sought to argue without a direct appeal to their convictions about the revealed will of God and a given shape to personal and social morality. They have sought common ground and common criteria.

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for what is good and true and what is not. The tragedy is that, whatever the context in which dissenting arguments arise, they rarely, if ever, get a public hearing. You can be overwhelmed with angry reader responses just for running a story about one couple’s decision to protest against what they see as a devaluation of marriage. You can be forced to make a public apology or be removed from your job, just for daring to say ‘I disagree’. Yet responsible public debate requires both sides to be heard respectfully, even sympathetically, before they are evaluated. It ought to be a matter of serious concern to all if counter-arguments are not allowed to be heard, let alone engaged.

So the atmosphere is highly charged. Both sides of the debate understand that the presenting issue is surrounded by a number of other more profound issues to do with the nature of human existence, the nature and limits of freedom, the best and most nourishing environment for the development of children, and the way we handle both diversity and disagreement. The consequences of accepting this change or decisively rejecting it are massive and they have not always been examined openly and honestly. Instead, much more subtle modes of persuasive discourse have been employed. The normality and even the desirability of same-sex intimate unions had been the subtext of Hollywood movies long before Four Weddings and a Funeral and will continue to be so long after The Imitation Game. Primary school curricula and reading lists now include specific reference to sexual orientation, the normality of diversity in sexual partnerships, and much more. Rumours are rife of international aid payments tied to an openness to change on this issue. ‘What I do’ has morphed into ‘who I am’ without anybody noticing. The slogans suborn the language of ‘relevance’, ‘tolerance’, compassion and ‘equality’ on one side, and ‘unnatural’, ‘perverse’, ‘destructive’ and ‘harmful’ on the other. But without reliable agreed criteria, who is to say just who is using and who is abusing these terms?

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3 Four Weddings and Funeral (PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1994); The Imitation Game (Black Bear Pictures, 2014).
4 The primary school near my home makes use of the children’s book And Tango Makes Three, by P. Parnell & J. Richardson (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005) and celebrates ‘Wear it Purple Day’, which began as address of bullying, especially homophobic bullying, but has gone much further (see www.safeschoolscoalititon.org.au).
We have not arrived at this point by accident. Careful thought has gone into how to re-educate the community as a whole and turn rejection into acceptance. Particular attention has been paid to securing the support of the gate-keepers of public opinion — journalists, film-makers, educators and politicians. There has been no conspiracy. This is an openly acknowledged, deliberate strategy to bring about a highly significant social change. And it has always involved marginalising, demonising and finally silencing those who speak against it.

2. The framework for a Christian discussion of marriage and sex

So how do Christians speak into this debate? There is no neutral starting point for discussion, the atmosphere is tense and the deliberate campaign of re-education on this issue has been underway for decades. Christians rightly want to be both compassionate and faithful, and in the eyes of some that combination is so difficult at times one or other of these commitments must be redefined. Acknowledging our own brokenness, misdirected desire and continuing battle with sin means we cannot stand in a censorious position simply condemning the behaviour of others, but what room remains for speaking of some choices as harmful, self-destructive and deeply wrong? Furthermore, in the search for common ground, a number of Christian contributors to the debates have made very significant concessions, which have themselves made dissent from the campaign to legitimize homosexual behaviour even more difficult. Confused issues include the relation of: sexual behaviour and personal identity; the unitive and procreative purposes of sex and marriage; the Old Testament Law and New Testament ethics; genuine inclusion and the call for repentance; the historic social conscience of evangelicalism (e.g. Wilberforce’s battle against slavery, Luther King’s battle against racial discrimination) and the issues at the heart of the present debate. The classically Christian appeal to Scripture is made complicated by the suggestion of interpretive complexity at each of the critical points and an argument that what we face today is something very different to that which is spoken about in these ancient texts. While serious responses have been made at each of these points, they are rarely heard or even acknowledged. Most unsettling for some is the way high

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7 Kirk & Madsen, 179, 189–90.
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profile Christian figures, such as Steve Chalke in the UK and Tony Campolo in the US, have announced their support for same-sex intimate unions.8

In such a charged environment the positive Christian message is one of the first casualties. Indeed, part of the strategy alluded to earlier involves casting religious argument as inherently negative, reactive, repressive and even harmful. Yet the Christian who knows the goodness of God, present in our world from the moment of its creation but concentrated in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has something very positive to say about God’s rich provision for human flourishing. He made the world to work and to work well. He gave it its own intelligibility: we can make sense of the world on its own terms, but never fully without reference to him. His determination to secure the future of all who will turn to him and who will trust the one he has provided as the Saviour of the world — despite the extraordinary cost—is a testimony to his benevolence.

In the end, Christian teaching about homosexuality does not simply rely on five isolated, condemnatory biblical texts — ‘five uneasy pieces’ from Genesis 19, Leviticus 18–20, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. It is anchored in a far richer biblical theology of human relationships that begins in creation and ends in the consummation of all things. In Genesis 2 a woman is brought to a man to be united to him. In Revelation 19.9 we are invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb. The New Jerusalem comes down from heaven adorned as a bride for her husband (Rev 21.2). At neither extremity of the Bible’s overarching story is this imagery merely incidental. The union of a man and a woman in a life-long exclusive sexual partnership pictures something both profound and consistent in the purposes of God. The deep, personal giving and receiving of each other, the delight in what makes us different as well as what unites us, the orientation to new life and an open generosity towards others, all point back to God. Of course the explanatory centre is Christ — the relation of husband and wife is brought into the closest connection with the relation of Christ and the church in Ephesians 5. All things are made by him, through him and for him (Col 1.16), including marriage. Redefining marriage is not just a matter of tinkering with interchangeable or even dispensable details; it is tampering with something

deeply woven into the fabric of reality and necessary for human flourishing. What happens to the Bible’s teaching about Christ and the church if marriage is no longer the relation of a husband and a wife?

Sexuality is part of humanity as created by God. It is a good and delightful part of how we were made. Expressed in the way in which God intended it to be, it is a nourishing, life-promoting gift. We honour God as we delight in this aspect of who he made us to be. The Bible’s view of sex is positive and encouraging: ‘Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love’ (Prov. 5.18–19). Right from the very beginning, the marriage of a man and woman is an honourable thing which recognises and delights in what we might call the polarity of the race (male and female) — the words of Adam when Eve is brought to him in the Garden, the delight expressed in the Song of Songs, Jesus’ presence at the wedding in Cana and poetic language about the bride of the Lamb, all in different ways attest to this. No wonder God says to us through the writer to the Hebrews, ‘Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous’ (Heb. 13.4). Yet our sexuality is not what defines us as human beings or even as particular human beings. It is possible to be fully human and not personally experience every human possibility. It is possible to be fully human, and joyfully so, and live without sex. Many do by choice or by necessity — not to mention the human being par excellence, Jesus himself. No, the Bible’s language for what defines us as human beings is the image of God. We are made to be in relationship with God and to live and act in the created world as those properly related to the Creator. That is what distinguishes us from the rest of the animal creation. That is what defines us. Ultimately we were not made for sex just as we were not made for work (though both remain good, even now). We were made to know the one who made us and to live in his world as his people under his blessing. We were made to participate in that wonderful fellowship that is eternally his as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

However, all of that began to unravel with the decision to live apart from God, to seek independence from him, to decide what is good and healthy and right, and what is evil and destructive and wrong, without reference to him. Sex is a casualty of the Fall like everything else. Misdirected desire, exploitation and abuse, and the overturning of boundaries set by God are all the product of futile thinking and depraved behaviour, which are themselves the result of ‘exchanging the truth about God for a
lie’ (Rom. 1.25). Romans 1.18–32 outlines the downward spiral that follows that initial decision, culminating not only in the embrace of degrading and destructive behaviour, but also in the celebration of it. The impact of the Fall is all-embracing. It extends to the genetic level of our being and distorts the largest scale social structures. Each of us is affected in every facet of who we are. Of course we are still capable of speaking the truth and of expressing genuine other-centred compassion, generosity and love, but alongside this and overshadowing it all is our capacity for the opposite. Each one of us experiences this fracture in a propensity, predisposition or orientation towards certain destructive behaviours. Some feel the pull of greed and covetousness more than others. Some wrestle with anger and violence, some with pride, arrogance and hardheartedness. Some have difficulty with honesty and truth-telling. Some struggle with sexual temptation of one kind or another — promiscuity, adultery, or same-sex attraction. Outward circumstances are met with an inward inclination (James 1.13–15) — misdirected desire or wrongly ordered love as Augustine famously called it — and we are tempted.’ Yet the very fact that we are tempted, though a legacy of the Fall, is not itself sin. By God’s grace it is possible to endure it (1 Cor. 10.13). As Luther famously said, quoting one of Jerome’s hermits, ‘Dear brother, you cannot prevent the birds from flying over your head, but you can certainly keep them from building a nest in your hair’. Luther was not trivialising temptation. He certainly realised that temptation — perhaps some temptations more than others — could at times be incredibly intense and all-consuming. The struggle against temptation is not an easy thing and compassion rather condemnation is the proper response of fellow-strugglers. Luther’s point was that God is the one to turn to in the midst of the struggle. That’s why we pray ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’ (Matt. 6.13).

Into a world where everything, including our sexuality, is fractured by sin, the gospel is spoken as a word of forgiveness and hope. God has entered his creation in order to undo the damage done at the Fall. Through Jesus, the eternal Son who has taken a full human nature fully to himself — more particularly, through his perfectly faithful life, his atoning death and his triumphant resurrection — salvation is offered to all men and women. Every community, including the LGBTI community, is addressed by the gospel. The love of God is proclaimed as Jesus and what he has done is made known. The summons of God to faith, repentance and new life is given, since unconditional and unrestrained grace radically reorients the lives of those who

9 James 1.13–15; Augustine, City of God, XV.22 (NPNF II:302–303).
10 Luther, An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer (1519) in LW 42:73.
receive it. No one is beyond the reach of grace. Where Christians have given that impression, we need to repent and seek to model the open-armed generosity of our heavenly Father. Yet no one who has received grace can continue to insist that they determine for themselves what is good and what is evil. Discipleship does involve attentively hearing and changing in the light of our Master’s teaching (Matt. 7.21–27). The gospel is good news and it makes a concrete difference to the way we view ourselves and the world.

One of those differences is, or should be, the way we treat those who are struggling with temptation and those who have surrendered to it. Understanding grace entails an understanding that each one of us is lost and needy apart from God’s mercy towards us in Jesus Christ. We do not stand over or better than anyone else who struggles with their predisposition towards particular sins. I’ve already mentioned that compassion rather than condemnation is the proper attitude of fellow-strugglers. Aware of what God in Christ has done for us we reach out and welcome the broken and those trapped by the powerful illusion of ‘misdirected love’. We want them first and foremost to hear of something far better than they could ever have imagined. We want them to hear of the possibility of a life without shame, without fear and without condemnation. That doesn’t mean trying to ‘fix’ them as if that were in our power and as if we ourselves are without need of ‘fixing’. The great ‘fix’ for all of us will only come when Jesus returns and the struggle with sin is over forever, when every tear is wiped away, when death itself is undone and there is no more mourning or crying or pain (Rev. 21.4). That is God’s work and he will most certainly accomplish it. Our responsibility, in the meantime, is show the same unconditional love which was shown to us, while we speak with gentleness but without compromise of what God has made known about his will for us. It is about demonstrating as well as teaching the plausibility of living as a wholehearted disciple of Jesus Christ in today’s world and the deep implausibility of the alternatives.”

The gospel holds out for us the hope of forgiveness secured, justification given and a day when the triumph of Christ will be realised in every life and every situation. We and even the creation itself await the redemption of the children of God (Rom. 8.19–24a). That redemption has a particular character though. ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8.1). It is Jesus who ‘delivers us from the wrath to come’ (1 Thess. 9–10). The final salvation is salvation in the

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11 Ed Shaw’s book, *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-Sex Attraction* (Nottingham: IVP, 2015) is a wonderful encouragement in this direction. Ed writes as a man who experiences same-sex attraction but remains committed to living in the light of the Bible’s teaching on the subject.
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midst of judgment. The disorder of the world and the harm caused by the pursuit of an illusory autonomy — for every breath and heartbeat of even the most rebellious remains God’s gift — will not be ignored or minimalized. Yet the Christian gospel anchors our sure hope of forgiveness and deliverance and the making of all things new. Though that hope does not include marriage and sex, which are realities for this world only according to Jesus (Mk 12.25), still the great joy and thanksgiving of a wedding provides an ideal picture of the consummation of God’s purposes. The redeemed people of God are presented to Christ as a pure and glorious bride to her husband (Rev. 19.6–9). This is the marriage that really matters and the only one that lasts forever.

3. The specific references to homosexual behaviour in outline

The texts which indicate that there is something profoundly wrong with homosexual behaviour are properly understood within this movement from creation to fall to redemption and consummation. Each of these texts have been expounded in great detail in the light of the current debates. Despite ingenious attempts to side-step the obvious, the sin of the townsfolk in Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is not simply a failure of hospitality, though it was certainly that.12 What they proposed was both a violent attack and a sexual act. Yet it was not simply the violence and the lack of consent that made what they proposed so horrific either. That is clear, not only in the context, but also in the later Jewish literature and in the New Testament, where Sodom and/or Gomorrah are spoken of as places where God’s design for sex is distorted in a most shameful way. Ezekiel 16.46–50 does indeed speak of pride, hardheartedness and the abuse of the needy. But it also says ‘they did an abomination before me’, language used in Leviticus and elsewhere of homosexual acts. Jude 7 speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities ‘which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire’.13 Why was it an abomination? Why is it ‘unnatural desire’? The answer lies in the positive teaching about God’s creation of humanity as ‘male and female’ and the provision of and delight in marriage and sex in precisely that context.

12 Much of what is said here could also be said of the horrific escalation of such behavior in the somewhat parallel incident in Judges 19.22–26. Such was the outcry on that occasion that wholesale war erupted (Judg. 20).
The two explicit prohibitions of homosexual acts in the Levitical law (Lev. 18.22 and 20.13) are unqualified. They do not speak of consent or age or commitment or any other consideration. The only factor mentioned is the gender of those involved. ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination’ (Lev. 18.22). ‘If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination ... (Lev. 20.13). These prohibitions come within the Holiness Code of Leviticus. They are part of what is to mark out the Israelites as different and distinct from the nations around them. To indulge in this behaviour, and the other sexual offences in surrounding verses, is to adopt the behaviour of the nations who stand under God’s judgment and those who do this will receive the same sentence. Nevertheless, three considerations indicate much more than that. Firstly, the expression ‘as with a woman’ evokes God’s intention for sex. It is created for a man and a woman to enjoy together. The language used suggests the creation of humanity as ‘male and female’, and God’s original design is here brought to bear on the question of this particular kind of behaviour. Secondly, the use of ‘an abomination’ in both texts speaks of something profoundly wrong with the behaviour rather than something which might be appropriate in some contexts but inappropriate in others. It cannot be reduced to a matter of ritual purity or social taboo which might be set aside in the very different circumstances of the twenty-first century. The language is exceedingly strong and whenever it is used in the OT (more than 100 times) it indicates something that is grossly offensive to God. Thirdly, the very fact that this behaviour is also condemned in the New Testament makes clear that this prohibition belongs to a different category to the food and clothing laws of the Old Covenant which distinguished the nation of Israel from others but do not apply when the people of God are no longer equated with the physical descendants of Abraham. Jesus declared all foods clean and so set aside the food laws of Leviticus. The apostle Peter resisted this change and needed not only a vision from heaven (Acts 10) but also a rebuke of Paul (Gal. 2) before he took it seriously. But moral injunctions such as those against murder, theft and adultery are reiterated in the New Testament — they are never acceptable either before or after the coming of Jesus — and homosexuality is properly located alongside them. Sexual immorality is one of those things on account of which ‘the wrath of God is coming’ (Col. 3.5–6).

We have already touched upon Romans 1. As the apostle Paul outlines the downward spiral that is consequent upon the human decision to ‘suppress the truth’ and ‘refuse
to honour [God] as God or give thanks to him’, he speaks of God’s judgment in terms of ‘giving them up’. ‘God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves’ (Rom. 1.24). ‘For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error’ (Rom. 1.26–27). The language is strong. This behaviour is described as ‘impurity’, ‘dishonourable’, ‘contrary to nature’ and ‘shameless’. It is a particularly acute example of the rebellion which provokes ‘the wrath of God’ (Rom. 1.18). It is an overthrow of God’s design — that is what the language of ‘natural’ and ‘contrary to nature’ indicates — and the chapter reaches a climax when it speaks of people not only doing these things (and the list is widened to include other behaviour besides that of homosexual acts, it must be said) ‘but give approval to those who practice them’ (Rom. 1.32). Once again the context, the flow of the argument and the actual words used all tell against any suggestion that the real issue is a lack of consent, or the abandonment of a previous heterosexual relationship, or the exploitation of positions of power (against slaves or minors) or pagan ritual practices. Particularly telling against such suggestions is the inclusion of female same-sex activity alongside male same-sex activity. The overarching problem is, rather, ‘a debased mind’ which does ‘what ought not to be done’ (Rom. 1.28). What is more, the acceleration into this activity is itself part of the judgment of God (witness the threefold ‘God gave them up …’ vv. 24, 26, 28). Of course the next chapter prevents anyone from assuming they are without sin and so in a position to stand in judgment over such people. However, as one writer puts it, ‘Just because Paul wants us to see our own sin does not mean that all moral iniquity ceases to be sin’.

Paul’s argument in Romans 1 begins with the overturning of God’s purpose in creation by those who ‘suppress the truth by their unrighteousness’. In 1 Corinthians he provides a short list of vices within the framework of the coming kingdom of God: ‘Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God’ (1 Cor. 6.9–10). Mention of exclusion from the kingdom of God underlines the seriousness of each of the vices Paul mentions... 

15 DeYoung, Homosexuality, 49–57 (pp. 56–7); M. Bird & S. Harris, ‘Paul’s Jewish View of Sexuality in Romans 1:26–27’, in Bird & Preece, Sexegesis, 87–104.
here (not just homosexual behaviour). From the standpoint of the New Testament as well, it is clear, the stakes are very high when it comes to this issue. It is clear from the context in 1 Corinthians, parallel terminology used in Leviticus 18 and 20, and etymological considerations, that the two words which are translated ‘men who practice homosexuality’ in this passage refer to the active and passive partners in homosexual sexual activity. Once again any suggestion that the reference should be understood more narrowly to exploitation, or pederasty, or ritual prostitution cannot be justified from the text itself. The condemnation of this behaviour is no more narrow than that of the other behaviours mentioned in this passage. Homosexual activity has no place in the coming kingdom of God. However, it is just as important to notice the verse which follows: ‘And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God’ (1 Cor. 6.11). ‘[P]ractising homosexuals, no less than other sinners, are potential candidates for regeneration’. Such a dramatic change, which can only be effected by God, will, of course, mean forsaking those patterns of behaviour which would otherwise exclude you from the kingdom of God. That is the purpose of Paul’s argument in this chapter. ‘Flee from sexual immorality’, he will write as the chapter concludes. ‘Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body’ (1 Cor. 6.18).

Christ’s apostle to the nations, Paul, wrote again on this subject in one of his last letters to his ministry apprentice, Timothy.

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. (1 Tim. 1.8–10)

One of the two words used in 1 Corinthians 6 is used again here. Paul includes ‘men who practice homosexuality’ in a list of behaviours which he knew the Old Testament Law condemned. Yet this is not just a word for the era before Christ. Paul begins his long sentence with a clause insisting that the Law is good. At the other end of the list, however he characterises all these behaviours as contrary to ‘sound doctrine’, an expression he uses also in 2 Timothy 4.3 and Titus 2.1. Behaviour and doctrine are

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inextricably linked as far as Christ’s apostle is concerned. There are forms of behaviour which both contravene the good law of God and undermine the sound teaching of the gospel of grace. God’s undeserved favour is freely given but it can be rejected as much by what we do as what we say.

As even this brief outline makes clear, the Bible does speak directly on the subject of homosexual activity and its assessment is uniformly negative. As one evangelical scholar has put it, ‘there is nothing ambiguous about the biblical witness concerning homosexuality’. However, even scholars personally committed to the acceptability of same-sex intimate unions acknowledge this. So, Diarmaid MacCulloch of Oxford University wrote in 2003, ‘Despite much well-intentioned theological fancy footwork to the contrary, it is difficult to see the Bible as expressing anything else but disapproval of homosexual activity, let alone having any conception of homosexual identity. The only alternatives are either to try to cleave to patterns of life and assumptions set out in the Bible, or to say that in this, as in much else, the Bible is simply wrong.’ In the same year, on the other side of the Atlantic, Dan Via of Duke University Divinity School, in the midst of outlining a positive case for homosexuality, concluded ‘the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally’. Nevertheless, it is important to remember again why the Bible’s teaching is so uniformly against homosexual behaviour — not a condemnation of the temptation to act in such a way but the activity itself. Homosexuality involves an overturning and repudiation of God’s good creational intent: he created humanity male and female and as male and female we are the image of God. His intention is a joyful, shame-free expression of that sexual polarity in the context of marriage. Such marriage, as the basis of the family and a picture of the union between Christ and his church, is to be honoured by all. Any behaviour that repudiates or undermines this exceedingly good gift that God has given both dishonours him and harms his creatures. That is why the Bible’s language in condemning homosexual behaviour is so consistent and so strong.

\[\text{DeYoung, Homosexuality, 73.}
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\[\text{D. O. Via & R. A. J. Gagnon, Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 93. Long lists have been compiled of those supportive of homosexual unions who recognize the Bible teaches otherwise. These lists include, Pim Pronk, Louis Crompton, Bernadette Brooten, Thomas K Hubbard, William Schoedel, Martti Nissinen, Walter Wink. See R. A. J. Gagnon, ‘How Bad is Homosexual Practice According to Scripture and Does Scripture’s Indictment Apply to Committed Homosexual Unions?’ online at http://www.robgagnon.net/HowBadIsHomosexualPractice.htm (accessed 1 July 2015).}\]
4. The challenge of same-sex intimate unions

This may well be acknowledged as the Christian teaching on the subject of homosexual behaviour, explaining why orthodox Christians around the world stand opposed to a redefinition of marriage to include same-sex intimate unions. But by what right do we speak beyond ourselves to the world at large on this issue? There are two answers to that question. The first is that proclaiming God’s purpose for all human beings and his provision for our common failure in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, is an act of Christian discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ involves ‘observing all that I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28.20). Following his commission to make disciples of all nations involves ‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’. How can we be faithful disciples and remain silent on this issue about which the Bible is clear and unambiguous and our contemporaries are so confused? Sexual activity between two members of the same-sex is a repudiation of the way God made the world to be and invites his judgment. It is one of those things on account of which the wrath of God is coming. God has better things for his creatures than that. His plan, the way he made the world and relationships in the world to work best, is far better than what is currently on offer.

The second answer is because of our commitment to the communities in which we live. Like the Old Testament exiles in Babylon, we seek the welfare of the city in which the Lord has placed us (Jer. 29.7). Sometimes it is more loving to say ‘no’ than to say ‘yes’. A redefinition of marriage so as to include same-sex intimate unions will be harmful. First, it will impact the nature of existing marriages. At the most basic level, such marriages will no longer be marriages pure and simple but heterosexual marriages. These are marriages in which both sexes or genders are celebrated and honoured as opposed to other marriages where this is not the case. More profoundly, it will further detach our understanding of marriage from procreation. The unitive and procreative elements of marriage and sex are not alternatives. Sex unites a man and a woman as they give their bodies to each other. It is also the act by which new life is conceived according to God’s plan. Of course not every act of sexual intercourse results in a pregnancy and neither is it necessarily the intention of those engaged in the act. However, to detach these two facets from one another in the very definition of marriage is to transform marriage into little more than another opportunity for self-expression. Undoubtedly other steps have been taken in that direction already. Nevertheless, this change in the definition of marriage is the most radical and most devastating step of all. Marriage is not simply a human social convention which we are free to redefine at will. Nor is its primary purpose companionship, though
undoubtedly that is an important feature. At its heart marriage is a gift which is shaped by the realities which God himself created — sexual polarity as male and female and the commission to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen. 1.27–28). So marriage redefined will become a merely human construct and one which is profoundly out of step with reality.

Secondly, it will impact the children brought up in the context of these relationships. They will not grow up enjoying the love and nurture of both biological parents, nor simply of two parents who represent to them the sexual polarity of the race. There are, of course, many children who develop well despite, through tragic circumstances, being deprived of one or both of their biological parents. However, it is a different thing altogether for the definition of marriage to consider these critical relationships incidental and dispensable. Men and women parent differently and both contributions are ideal for the development of children who are confident in their own identity and sexuality and who respect the opposite sex. The research that has demonstrated this repeatedly is routinely ignored or derided by those who advocate a new definition of marriage.”

Thirdly, such a change would further cloud our appreciation of brotherhood, friendship and life-long companionship. This is certainly part of a much bigger issue to do with the sexualisation of relationships. However, it is significant in the current debate because many of the advocates of marriage argue that the fundamental purpose of marriage is companionship. Some argue this on the basis of a mistranslation of Gen. 2.18 — ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a companion fit for him’. The inclusion of same-sex intimate unions as marriage is necessary, so the argument goes, in order to honour and promote and give proper recognition to this basic human need. Companionship is indeed a great good. It is an important feature of healthy marriages. However, marriage is not the only context in which companionship is real and good and even life-long. Sexual activity is not essential for genuine companionship even if the unique companionship

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21 One such argument which repeatedly mistranslates and then misuses passages of Scripture passages is Changing Attitude, ‘Fifteen theological arguments for gay marriage’ online at http://changingattitude.org.uk/resources/publications/fifteen-theological-arguments-for-gay-marriage (accessed 2 July 2015). In Genesis 2, especially given the immediately preceding verses, the word indicates help and the idea that Adam is not able to fulfill the commission given to him by God without the help of one suitable for that task.
of marriage is a proper context for sexual activity. Why must the relationship of David and Jonathan be sexualized? Why should we assume that two men or two women who flat together are each other’s sexual partners? Why should people snigger when a person of either sex is introduced as ‘my friend’? To be sure, the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex intimate unions is not the only contributor to this problem. However, it will further cloud the issue.

Finally, a legislative change in this area raises very significant questions about the relationship of church and state, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and even freedom of association. Not only is the gap between our culture and its Judaeo-Christian heritage widened but governments are assuming the right to determine the shape of one of the basic building blocks of society in an unprecedented way. However, all they can do is change the definition of marriage in law. They cannot change the underlying reality, since marriage is God’s gift and he determines its character and its boundaries. As the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer warns, ‘For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God’s Word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful’.

So while what is at stake is so important that supporters of the move to endorse same-sex intimate unions as marriage will not tolerate dissent, what is at stake is so important that Christians cannot refrain from dissenting. The heat generated by the current debate is a reflection of a clash of worldviews. A worldview that has at its centre a sovereign Lord, who is both just and good and whose word brings life, is clashing with a worldview whose highest good is the pursuit of individual desire and the unrestricted freedom of self-expression. As in so many clashes of this type, truth is an early casualty and so is compassion and a willingness to treat those who disagree with us with respect. Sadly, this has not been all on one side.

5. The ongoing problem of a campaign against dissent

And so we return to the subject with which I began, the campaign against dissent on this issue which will not end if and when the definition of marriage is legally changed. Concern about such a campaign was certainly in the mind of the US Supreme Court justices as they made their 5-4 decision in the case of Obergefell v Hodges, delivered
on 26 June 2015. That landmark case overturned the right of individual US states to define marriage only in terms of a man and woman. In the majority opinion, Justice Kennedy included this statement:

Finally, it must be emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered. The same is true of those who oppose same-sex marriage for other reasons. In turn, those who believe allowing same-sex marriage is proper or indeed essential, whether as a matter of religious conviction or secular belief, may engage those who disagree with their view in an open and searching debate. (p. 27)

However, this assurance did not even convince others on the Supreme Court bench. The Chief Justice, in presenting a dissenting judgment, remarked:

Today’s decision, for example, creates serious questions about religious liberty ... The majority graciously suggests that religious believers may continue to ‘advocate’ and ‘teach’ their views of marriage. The First Amendment guarantees, however, the freedom to ‘exercise’ religion. Ominously, that is not a word the majority uses. (pp. 27–28)

One of the other dissenting judges, Justice Alito, added

Today’s decision ... will be used to vilify Americans who are unwilling to assent to the new orthodoxy. In the course of its opinion, the majority compares traditional marriage laws to laws that denied equal treatment for African-Americans and women. The implications of this analogy will be exploited by those who are determined to stamp out every vestige of dissent. (p. 6)

I have already mentioned how decisions like the one made in the United States have routinely been followed by the application of anti-discrimination legislation to coerce dissenters into either silence or acquiescence. In many of those countries assurances were given at the time the legislation was passed that conscientious objections, in particular those held on religious grounds, would be respected. Subsequent events have shown how shallow those assurances were in reality. Redefining marriage is a serious matter, but it is not the end game as far as the advocates are concerned. The

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silencing of dissent and the total unqualified acceptance of sexual activity between two members of the same sex is the goal. In this volatile environment the challenge to be both compassionate and faithful is as urgent as ever. We must speak, so that our fellow brothers and sisters understand the word of God on this issue and just what is at stake. We must speak so that those in the wider community might be made aware of the harm such a move will bring to all, not just to some. Amongst all the other things that must be said though, we must insist upon the right to dissent while supporting and loving those who struggle with same-sex attraction and those who have been trapped by the lies of the evil one into a lifestyle and behaviour that are contrary to the good that God intends and are ultimately destructive. We cannot afford to back away from either compassion or faithfulness — and that means we cannot afford to be silent at a time like this.

Some helpful further reading:


DeYoung, K. *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2015.


