

## Understanding the Gay Marriage Debate

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While countries with conservative governments, like New Zealand and United Kingdom, and most recently, Ireland, and even the US Supreme Court have recognised Gay Marriage, Australia is yet to pass such legislation. What follows is a very brief attempt to sketch why people decide the way they do.

Most people who oppose gay marriage do so ultimately because they also see same-sex relations as wrong. The up front arguments may vary, but this assumption lies behind them. And most in the Christian community who see same-sex relations as wrong do so because the Bible says so. Leviticus in the Old Testament calls it an abomination for men to lie with men as they do with women. Jews at the time when Christianity emerged had extended this to apply to both men and women. They often singled out this prohibition as a virtue to be contrasted with other cultures. This is why Paul uses it in Romans as his prime example of how human beings have gone wrong. They had denied God's true nature and as a result had denied their own true nature. Paul and the Jews of his time read the creation story as clearly defining that God made people male or female. That is their true nature. There are no homosexual people as such and for a man to act like a woman or vice versa was to pervert what God had made. For everyone is heterosexual. To deny this and give rein to feelings which go in the wrong direction is sin.

There are many people who still assume that all people are heterosexual, so that any feelings and actions which are directed to people of one's own sex are either a deliberate act of perversion or a sign of psychological maladjustment which should be corrected. So at their best, people with such beliefs will seek to help those with a wrong orientation to find the correct one and they will do so often with great care and compassion. They should not be treated as bigots or hateful. It makes sense that they would not want to affirm gay marriage, because that would amount to affirming what they know is wrong. Some will see such wrongness as the result of Adam's sin, but Paul's argument is rather that it is tied to denying God's true nature.

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Most people who support gay marriage do so because they have come into contact with people who are gay, whom they do not see as having deliberately perverted their sexuality or as sick. Sometimes it will be family members and the more openly people share their stories these days the more widespread is the realisation that some people simply are that way and that it is not their fault nor a sign of psychological damage. This can happen in circles where there is reverence for the Bible. For some it means the parting of the ways with their faith. For others it leads them to ask how well Paul and his contemporaries understood the situation and whether other biblical values can help them address their situation. They have no problems agreeing with Paul where in fact what has happened is that people have deliberately perverted the way they naturally are. But what if the evidence before them has led them to conclude that there really are people who are gay and, indeed, some of them indeed are outstanding human individuals? These people, they conclude, fall outside of the categories which Paul and his fellow Jews assumed and so should not be treated as sinners or sick. They need support to make it possible for them to have healthy and supportive relationships, including marriage, without discrimination.

At one level it comes down to how we assess what we experience. Is it really true that all people are heterosexual? Then not supporting gay marriage makes sense. If it is not true, then we wrong them by not allowing them to have committed relations recognised in society as marriage. For people of faith it also comes down to how we approach scripture. Are there precedents for recognising that biblical writers might not have had adequate information about some aspects of life? Indeed there are and some of them we simply take for granted. Thus most people these days would not share the views of Paul and his fellow Jews that creation all began just 6000 years ago, nor that it happened over 6 days, nor about how women were made, nor about languages came about (the tower of Babel) and much more. Respectful reading does not ridicule such ideas, but does recognise that they rest on assumptions which few today would share. So it is not all that strange that many would not consider mention of the creation of male and female in Gen 1:27 as an authoritative basis for believing that all people are heterosexual. It makes little sense to dismiss other elements in Genesis 1 while talking this verse as absolute science.

There are, indeed, a number of areas where social change and a better understanding have led to respectful revision of biblically based prohibitions and patterns. We have abandoned, for instance, attitudes towards slaves and women which see them as inferior. We have abandoned the absolute prohibition of divorce except for adultery and the absolute requirement that it be enforced where adultery has taken place. These changes have been driven in part by applying the flexibility and compassion we see in Jesus in his approach to scripture and its laws. It is never easy to set aside some commandments in favour of others. The early church on New Testament times engaged in heated debate over whether to keep or abandon the biblical command to circumcise male converts. The more liberal stance which argued it should not be enforced won through because people stood under the impact of Jesus' approach.

Pressures to revise what we have inherited as biblical rules must be treated cautiously. The pressure to go soft on honesty or to engage in what amounts to theft, so that we keep wealth and keep it from others, are to be resisted. Love and respect have to be central in all our dealings. Our response to the debate on gay marriage needs to be carried out in that spirit. In principle it should not be a problem to revise or restrict the application of biblical commands. Whether we do so or not will

depend to a large extent on how we evaluate what we see around us. Is everyone heterosexual or not? That will determine how our love flows. My own view is that the belief that everyone is heterosexual and that anyone feeling or acting otherwise is either sinful or in some way psychologically damaged is simply incorrect, just as I believe that the idea that the universe is only 6000 years old is incorrect. I would like to persuade others that this is so, but at least I hope I can encourage people to think about it.

One of the slightly strange arguments brought against gay marriage is that such couples will end up bringing up children and they might be disadvantaged. This overlooks two things: gay couples can already by law adopt children and do; and all parenting needs to consider carefully the range of a child's experiences, whether starting from a mixed or same gender marriage, and the challenge and privilege of parenting is much larger than what just two people do.