

# **Marriage, Sexuality, and Scriptural Interpretation**

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# Preface

On 31st October 2018 a Conversation on Marriage took place at Broadwater Road Uniting Church in Brisbane. The evening was recorded and short videos will soon be available documenting the entire proceedings from the event. What follows is the transcript from that event for the segments on the historic view on marriage by Dr. John Frederick, Lecturer in New Testament at Trinity College Queensland. As was expressed during the event, the views expressed in this document are the scholarly work and intellectual property of John Frederick. They do not represent the views of the Uniting Church in Australia or Trinity College Queensland.

I want to encourage you to watch the full set of videos when they are released, and to engage with the entire breadth of the arguments from both sides in a gracious and charitable manner. This document contains the basic talking points and manuscript that I worked from during the discussion. It is not, however, meant to be a sustained and comprehensive theological argument in and of itself. The event was organised into 5-7 minute segments, followed by conversation and Q+A. Thus, the constraints of the event meant that presentations had to be concise and tightly-constructed. I invite the reader to engage in an extended learning experience by consulting the works in the footnotes.

# Introductory Statement

I want to begin by thanking David for putting this event together and to Geoff for being willing to engage with me in this conversation about theology and marriage. As a North American Anglican minister I have sworn an oath to uphold the received, apostolic teaching that human sexual activity is meant to take place within a covenant marriage between a man and a woman. I am convinced that this is the correct biblical and theological view, and it is the view I will be seeking to articulate and defend today.

Although this might seem like a radically conservative view in the current theological climate, it is important to note that 25 of the 39 provinces of the Anglican Communion across the world hold the historic view.<sup>1</sup> They represent the vast majority of Anglicans by far. They do not represent a **fundamentalist fringe** but—on the contrary—**the catholic consensus**.

Still, this does not make it easy for me to hold to the historic position on marriage and human sexuality. Since coming to Australia, I've been labelled by some as a "simplistic

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<sup>1</sup> It is also the official doctrine of the entire Anglican Communion currently. At the Lambeth Conference of 2003, the Anglican Communion published the Windsor Report. This is a document which called for a moratorium on the ordination of active gay clergy and a halting of the development and implementation of same-gender marriage. Several Provinces in the Anglican Communion ignored the conciliar and catholic will of the Communion and moved ahead with both the ordination of LGBT active clergy and the development of Rites for Same-Gender Marriage. These Provinces include the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church (USA), and the Anglican Church in Canada. The Provinces of the Global South which represent the majority of Anglicans across the world provided pastoral oversight for congregations, clergy, and entire Dioceses in the United States because the Episcopal Church had caused its communicants to be in a situation of impaired communion with the binding Lambeth resolutions, the Windsor Report, and the will of the global Anglican Communion. Since 2003, there has been a mass exodus out of the Episcopal Church to the tune of 100,000 people. This includes entire Dioceses such as the Diocese of Fort Worth, the Diocese of Quincy (Illinois), the Diocese of South Carolina, and several others. These dioceses banded together and are in communion with the vast majority of global Anglicans as a new province called the Anglican Church in North America.

conservative” for holding to the resurrection as a key article of the faith. In the States—where even asking questions about same-gender marriage and human sexuality marked you out as a ‘liberal—I was routinely suspected of a being a ‘progressive.’

**“John’s preaching against guns and advocating non-violence. He’s a progressive!**

**“John’s holding Bernie Sanders rallies in his house and advertising them on FaceBook. Definitely a progressive!”**

So those terms. Those binaries. Those simplistic ways of grouping people no longer work. Though it may perplex us: we now personally know otherwise orthodox Christians who advocate for same-gender marriage. Likewise, many hold to the historic view on marriage, and they aren’t right-wing, Bible-thumping fundamentalists. We’ve seen in Anglicanism, and in Catholicism, and in the Orthodox Church, the global evangelical movement and the Pentecostal movements—and essentially in the entire majority world of the global South, that **the historic view is not fringe fundamentalism** but is the **current centrist consensus** of the **global church catholic**. So the old easy polar opposites show themselves to be obsolete and unhelpful.

Still, there is a pull in my soul. And there has been for some time. You see: I know what I believe. I know what the Bible says. I take seriously my ordination oaths and all the rest. But something happens when you become friends with Christians who experience same-gender attraction. If you’re a Christian, you can’t help but love them. And if you’re

anything like me or most millennials, the idea of a guy falling in love with another guy, or a woman finding companionship and intimacy with another woman—on the face of it—is not weird at all. We're not disgusted by it. We don't even find it strange. If the apostolic witness in the Bible said nothing about it; many of us would have no problem incorporating same-gender relationships into a theology of Christian marriage. So, for many of us, this topic is not something we **love** to continually harp on, but something we **lament** having to address. Most of us, even while giving lip service to the historic view, have secretly wished the conversation would just go away. We've ignored it because it causes a clash in our lived experience. We want it to go away—**not because we hate gay people**—but because we lack the courage and conviction to address this issue for ourselves. We simply do not know what to do. We're happy to hide under the umbrella of the older generations in leadership, because we can have the comfort of perpetually sitting on the fence on this issue.

But now we must address it ourselves. As Gen X'rs, millennials, and so on. And in some ways, good on the Assembly for forcing us to address a theology of marriage. Belittling or ignoring the issue and asking 'Can't we just move on to more important things?' does not do justice to the real tension in the Church.

I assert that the inspired, authoritative, apostolic witness of the New Testament, the ancient and contemporary consensus of the global church, and the teachings of Jesus and Second Temple Judaism limit human sexual behavior to one man and one woman in marriage. This constitutes a major challenge to myself and to us all. It is totally

counter-cultural! It is hard to bear! I recognise and respect that there are Christians who do not agree with me on this issue. I will be challenging ministers and congregations to boldly and graciously lead their churches rather than sitting on the fences of them when it comes to the difficult issues of our day. It's time to land somewhere. Far from hurting the life of the church, bold leadership will heal it. Far from restricting the reach of the Church, it will evangelistically expand it. Far from capitulating to new cultural norms for human sexuality; it will hold those norms and everything else captive to the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ and to the faith once delivered to the saints about him in the written Word, Holy Scripture.

## Scripture and Biblical Interpretation

The Church's theology of marriage and human sexuality must be nourished and regulated by the unique prophetic and apostolic testimony within Holy Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Some want to emphasize that it is appropriate to refer to Jesus as 'the Word of God' but they seem to struggle with the idea that, in addition, the words of Holy Scripture are the Spirit-inspired 'word of God-written.'

So often these days, when difficult biblical issues come up, I hear people say: "but the Bible is not the Word of God, Jesus is!" This is typically in response to embarrassing biblical episodes or difficult theological questions, like same-gender marriage. My view on this is that: the Bible IS the Word of God, the Bible IS divinely inspired as the product of human authors under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit-inspired words of Bible themselves are authoritative. We have no access to the incarnate Word, Jesus, except through the Spirit-inspired apostolic testimony about him in the Word of God written. So, does this make me a fundamentalist? Does it make those of us who hold this high view of biblical inspiration theologically naive? Well, if we are, then we stand in a long and venerable line of fellow fools for Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. The Basis of Union (1992), paragraph 5. "The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses." Available at <https://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union>.

The first “theologically-vacuous”<sup>3</sup> fundamentalists would be the author of 2 Tim 3:16 who considered the Old Testament Scriptures to be “breathed out by God” along with his equally empty-headed colleague in 2 Peter 1:21 who argued that the prophets “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Peter even extended this to Paul’s writings by referring to them as Scripture in 2 Pet. 3:15–16.<sup>4</sup> After these initial unsophisticated nitwits, more right-wing fundamentalists like Origen, Basil, and Jerome<sup>5</sup> dared to refer to the Scriptures as “written by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> Following in

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<sup>3</sup> For a larger context to this discussion please watch the discussion that followed this segment in which Geoff and I unpack the issue. See also Geoff Thompson, “How to Read the Bible: On the Use and Misuse of the Bible in the Same-Sex Marriage Debate” on ABC Religion and Ethics. 4 September 2017. Online: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-to-read-the-bible-on-the-use-and-misuse-of-the-bible-in-the-/10095424>. Accessed Oct 29th 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, <sup>16</sup> as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, **as they do the other Scriptures**” (2 Pet. 3:15b–16).

<sup>5</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978. I highly recommend this book for those interested in knowing what the early church thought about such topics as: scripture, tradition, the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Christ, sin, the church, and the sacraments. The author organises a large number of primary sources and groups them by categories and date. He then explains the views of the earliest theologians of the church, some of whom had been taught by the apostles themselves! Kelly summarizes the early Church’s view on Scripture in this way: “**It goes without saying that the fathers envisaged the whole of the Bible as inspired**. It was not a collection of disparate segments, some of divine origin and others of merely human fabrication,” 61.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 61, fn. 3. Origen, *c. Cels.* 5, 60; Basil, *hom. in ps.* I, I; Jerome, in *Is.* 29, 9 ff.

their “crude” and illogical footsteps were Tertullian, Chrysostom, and Augustine<sup>7</sup>—who because of their thick-witted ways must have considered the Bible a “flat text” or a doctrine “encyclopedia.”<sup>8</sup> After all of those insufferable bozos kicked the bucket, we were stuck with a mishmash of mere lightweight figures who were silly enough to refer to the Bible as the Word of God and to consider it verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit. Among these unrefined amateurs belong: Thomas Aquinas<sup>9</sup>, Martin Luther,<sup>10</sup> John

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 62–63. Tertullian, *c. Marc.* 4, 22; 5, 8; *de. an.* 11; 21; Chrysostom, *In. Ioh. hom.* I.I f; *de Laz. conc* 6, 9; Augustine, *Serm.* 246, l. Cf. 63: “Augustine, discussing the activity of the evangelists, admits that they used their own personal reminiscences in compiling the gospels, the function of the Spirit being to stimulate their memories and preserve them from error. It was not a case of His imparting a fresh revelation to them; rather did He regulate and control their mental powers (*De consens. evang.* 3, 30).” Augustine, in one of the earliest theological expositions on the precise nature of the inspiration of Scripture argues that God used “three principal types” of influence over the biblical author, namely “corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual.” The Spirit could give an biblical author a direct vision, or he could guide his intelligence, or he could prompt and enable him to “utter divine truth without knowing it,” 64 (Cf. *De div. quaest.* 2, q.I, l.)

<sup>8</sup> Uniting Church in Australia. *B23 Assembly Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*. 2018, 22: “The Bible is not simply an encyclopedia or rule book . . .” Yet, no actual sophisticated, scholarly argument for the traditional view argues that the Bible is an encyclopedia. The Working Group is fighting against a fundamentalist strawman here. Perhaps such a viewpoint does exist, but it surely isn’t the primary one, and it does not—by and large—represent the perspective of the people who oppose same-gender marriage.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province . First Part. Treatise on Sacred Doctrine Q1. Article 1. “Whether, besides philosophy, any further doctrine is required?” Benzinger: 1947. Online: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.i.html>. Here Aquinas says that **Holy Scripture is “inspired by God.”**

<sup>10</sup> LW 31.1, 356.

Calvin,<sup>11</sup> John Wesley,<sup>12</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith,

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<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 30 (I.7.1): "Before proceeding farther, it seems proper to make some observations on **the authority of Scripture**, in order that our minds may not only be prepared to receive it with reverence, but be divested of all doubt. When that **which professes to be the Word of God** is acknowledged to be so, no person, unless devoid of common sense and the feelings of a man, will have the desperate hardihood to refuse credit to the speaker. But since no daily responses are given from heaven, and **the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance**, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognised, unless **they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.**"

<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, "A Clear and Concise Proof of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures" in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*. Volume 15 (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1812), 351 ff. "All the miracles flow from divine power; all the prophecies, from divine understanding; the goodness of the doctrine, from divine goodness; and the moral character of the writers, from divine holiness . . . "I now propose short, clear, and strong arguments prove **the divine inspiration of the holy Scriptures.**" And, "Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterward, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the **Holy Scripture: this is that word of God which remaineth for ever**: of which, though heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away. **The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth.** Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy" from the "Preface" to John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. Lastly, "But the Christian rule of right and wrong is **the word of God, the writings of the Old and New Testament**; all that the Prophets and "holy men of old" wrote "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost;" all that Scripture which was given by inspiration of God, and which is indeed profitable for doctrine, or teaching the whole will of God; for reproof of what is contrary thereto; for correction of error; and for instruction, or training us up, in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)" from the Sermons: "The Witness of Our Own Spirit." Both accessed at accessed at <http://www.craigladams.com/archive/files/john-wesley-on-the-bible.html>.

<sup>13</sup> the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>14</sup> the Orthodox Church,<sup>15</sup> and over 50 million Anglicans in the Global South—to name a few.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith. Chapter I Of the Holy Scripture. Online: [https://reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](https://reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/). E.g., WCF I.II: “**Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament . . .** All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life”; I.IV: “The authority of the **Holy Scripture**, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because **it is the Word of God.**” Cf. I.V–X which continually refer to Holy Scripture as the divinely-Inspired Word of God. Cf. I.V: “We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and **reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture**. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, **the consent of all the parts**, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and **the entire perfection thereof**, are arguments whereby **it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God**: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

<sup>14</sup> *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. Paragraph 7: “[the] Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing.” Paragraph 9: “**Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit . . .**” and “For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–20, 3:15–16), holds that **the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself . . .** “In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, **consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.**” Further: ““since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that **the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.**” Paragraph 24: “**Sacred theology rests on the written word of God**, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation.”

<sup>15</sup> “Our faith and belief is in the person of Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God, **Who is revealed in the written word of God—Holy Scripture.**” Orthodox Church in America <https://oca.org/questions/otherconfessions/are-orthodox-christians-bible-believing>.

<sup>16</sup> The Jerusalem Declaration states: “**We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God written and to contain all things necessary for salvation.** The Bible is to be translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense, respectful of the church’s historic and consensual reading.” <https://www.gafcon.org/resources/the-complete-jerusalem-statement>

Tongue fully in cheek, I affirm with all of these groups and individuals that Jesus is the Word incarnate **and** that the Holy Scriptures are the Spirit-inspired Word of God written.

**We do not represent the fundamentalist fringe; we are the catholic consensus.**

Still, many who hold that “Jesus is the Word of God but the Bible is not” want to filter theology through a vague abstraction like “love” which—**ironically**—is a concept that is itself derived from the Bible!<sup>17</sup> This results in a growing sense of distrust in, disdain for, and ignorance of the Bible. It results in ministerial and congregational confusion, theological lukewarmness, and doctrinal error. It leads not only to biblical illiteracy but biblical apathy.

When Geoff says “the Word of God is not a body of information, but Jesus Himself,” I really do believe he inadvertently contributes to the confusion.<sup>18</sup> He draws an *either/or* on what should be a *both/and*. This is also evident in the Working Group document. They conclude that “same-gender marriage is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup> You notice, they say “consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ” not “consistent with Scripture.” This is because they argue that a biblical principle—love for neighbor—helps them to overcome the completely negative witness of Scripture on

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<sup>17</sup> Uniting Church in Australia. *B23 Assembly Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*. 2018, 7, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Geoff Thompson, “How to Read the Bible: On the Use and Misuse of the Bible in the Same-Sex Marriage Debate” on ABC Religion and Ethics. 4 September 2017. Online: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-to-read-the-bible-on-the-use-and-misuse-of-the-bible-in-the-/10095424>. Accessed Oct 29th 2018.

<sup>19</sup> *Assembly Standing Committee Report*, 49–50.

same-gender sexual acts.<sup>20</sup> This is a sophisticated rationale. I really do believe that the Working Group genuinely desires—as they themselves state—to make Scripture “the norm” for developing biblical doctrine.<sup>21</sup> I just think that the other interpretive moves they make in the document render that noble desire to be problematic and in need of some serious revision and reconsideration.

Scripture is unanimous in its prohibition against same-gender activity, including marriage. It is also unanimous in attributing to God a love that never abandons the ones who are on the margins. A love that relentlessly seeks the salvation and good of all people. We must remember both and live out both. To even claim that “Jesus is the Word” we first need to obtain that theological proposition *from the Word—the Bible*.

Scripture as the Word is not a competitor to Jesus the Word; it is, to paraphrase Luther,

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 7: “Jesus gave first priority to love for God and neighbour, and challenged Biblical laws when they were used to exclude people from worship and community life. The Church can learn from Jesus to read the scriptures in this same way, giving priority to love of God and neighbour in the way we read and teach. When we read scripture in this way it is harder to say that Bible verses like Leviticus 18–20 and Romans 1:27 give us rules to follow.” Cf. 27. I view this as an extremely problematic interpretive move. Once we make this move we introduce vague and abstract ideas as the interpretive lens, filter, or grid for biblical ethics. Ideas like “love for neighbour” are too broad to be helpful on their own unless they are helped along by other authoritative principles and ethical precepts that exist in the biblical text. Would Jesus have, for example, envisioned unrepentant adulterers, or people committing incest, or polygamy, or idol worshippers on the “narrow road that leads to life?” Would he say: ‘Well, the Bible is not about rules, it’s about love?’ In reality, Jesus upholds and intensifies the Old Testament moral commandments on the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, even saying: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore **whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven**, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:17-20 ESV)

<sup>21</sup> *Assembly Standing Committee Report*, 11–12: “. . . scripture [is] the ultimate norm in the life of the church . . .”

the crib in which Christ the Word comes to us.<sup>22</sup> As the Council of Orange so beautifully stated “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Scripture is “the cradle wherein Christ is laid.” LW 35:236. Though I became aware of the saying through Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 176.

<sup>23</sup> *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. Paragraph 24 citing Second Council of Orange, Canon 7: Denziger 180 (377) First Vatican Council.

## Human Sexuality and Nature

For a long time I remained elusive on the issue of human sexuality. Whenever it came up in my classes, I would present the various scholarly views, and leave it at that, not offering my personal view. I did this, not because I was a coward, but because I deeply care about my students. Since I was perceived as someone who was safe to talk with, I had the privilege of mentoring many 18-20 year olds who were closeted gay and lesbian Christians hiding in their churches and families. They were often surprised that a Christian leader could walk that fine line. One that listens and warmly welcomes, but withholds approval. One that allows LGBT folks to journey along with the church, even as they—and all Christians—are called to continually surrender their own personal desires to Jesus Christ.

Most of us are asking new questions of the text and, if we're honest, we're having trouble finding a place to land. It's not that we want to be wishy-washy about the issue, but we're uncertain that we have the knowledge or proper scriptural and theological basis for taking one view or the other with true conviction. Both positions have massive implications, not just for the church, but for our beloved gay and lesbian friends and family.

For me, the scriptural place that draws me to think seriously about this is 1 Cor 6 verse 9 where the apostle Paul states that those who are sexually immoral and those who

practice homosexuality **will not inherit the kingdom of God**.<sup>24</sup> This is a sobering claim.

If the numerous commands to flee from sexual immorality (porneia) turn out to include consensual homosexual practice, this concern grows exponentially, at least for me.

The burden of proof is on the revisionists to prove that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the historic view on this is incorrect. I don't think they have made that case. At best, they have shown that different interpretive options exist. But what does this really show? Just because different opinions exist does not in itself mean that these opinions are equally valid.<sup>25</sup>

When one reads the argument that Paul makes in Rom. 1:27 in its biblical and cultural context, it becomes clear that Paul is not merely talking about exploitative sexual situations (called pederasty) or homosexual prostitution. Paul believes, like all Jews,

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. the “works of the flesh” in Galatians: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: **sexual immorality [porneia], impurity, sensuality**, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. **I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**” (Galatians 5:18–21 ESV)

<sup>25</sup> Uniting Church in Australia. *B23 Assembly Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*. 2018, 7. The idea that the rubric of love of God and neighbour makes it difficult to see Leviticus 18–20 and Romans 1:27 giving us “rules to follow” is too simplistic. That is, unless the Working Group wants to affirm incest, bestiality, child sacrifice, and adultery which are also condemned in Leviticus 18 they cannot simply rule out rules on the basis of “love.” The rules exist for the sake of displaying true love, not in contradiction to it. Robert A.J. Gagnon [*The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2001), 121] is very helpful in explaining how we might apply Leviticus today: “Obviously, one cannot simply say: it is in the book of Leviticus so obey it. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to regard the statutes in the Holiness Code as consisting of largely irrelevant purity regulations. Indeed, most of Leviticus 18–20 can be thought of as an expanded commentary on the Ten Commandments, with prohibitions against idolatry and witchcraft, stealing and lying, adultery and incest; and commands to honor one’s parents, keep the sabbath, and to ‘love one’s neighbor as oneself’ (Lev 19:18).” He adds: “Christians do not have the option of simply dismissing an injunction because it belongs to the Holiness Code.”

that human sexual relations can occur only between a man and a woman in marriage. He argues that all other sexual behavior is not according to nature. Jews and early Christians believed that the natural purpose of human sexuality can be observed in the anatomical fittedness of the human sexual organs, the complimentarity of male and female beings, and the possibility of procreation that exists only in an opposite sex union.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 182, 254. Gagnon argues that it is the procreative *potential* of the male and female sexual organs that functions as a clue toward the underlying argument in Rom. 1:27 and Second Temple Judaism concerning the moral status and “nature” of heterosexual sexual activity. This has some resonance but differs from the Roman Catholic argument in *Humane Vitae* which states that all sexual activity must serve both a *procreative* and *unitive* function. Whether or not one agrees with *Humane Vitae* on the topic of artificial versus natural contraceptive methods (it only allows for natural approaches to birth control), the *unitive* purpose of sex is beautifully expressed in that document. While Gagnon strongly presents the biological, anatomical, complimentary, and procreative arguments underlying the biblical passages on human sexuality, *Humane Vitae* reminds us that the sexual act is not merely a physical and biological act, it is a *unifying* act in the context of a marriage between one man and one women. During the discussion I noted that the Working Group document does not engage with Roman Catholic moral theology at all. This is a major weakness, because even if one does not agree with the conclusions, Catholic moral theology occupies a primary place in the global conversation. Leaving it out entirely, and then discussing a novel approach to “nature” does not allow the new contributions and suggestions made by the Working Group to be situated in the context of the discussion on natural theology that has been happening in Christian theology for over 2000 years. Since Paul and Second Temple Judaism frequently appeal to nature as the foundation of their arguments against same-gender behaviours, it seems crucial that natural theology should occupy a central place in the discussion. For more information see *Humane Vitae* (Of Human Life) at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html).

The Working Group argues that since Romans 1 is an extended argument against idolatry, it is not an argument against homosexuality in specific.<sup>27</sup> This is true! Yet, that doesn't therefore mean it is suddenly ok to consider the **vices** that Paul argues against in Rom 1 as **merely incidental or even virtuous**. Paul actually ends the segment by emphasizing **God's judgment** on these activities and by **chastising those who would "not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."** Put this next to Robyn Whitaker's recent ABC article on the topic in which she stated that issues of human sexuality were "not a particular concern of the Bible," and it causes me to stop in

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<sup>27</sup> *Assembly Standing Committee Report*, 29: "[in Romans 1:24–28] condemnation of same-gender sexual relations as typical of pagan depravity; a view he knows that the Roman congregations with their strong Jewish background would share. In Romans 2 he then goes on to argue that his fellow Jews are, however, just as in need of God's salvation because they too have sinned. His wider argument, therefore, is not that the Gentiles more broadly, or those who practice same-gender sexual relations more specifically, are any worse than the rest of humanity."—No doubt! But this does not therefore change what Paul is labelling sin into a virtue! In verses 28–31 Paul labels other sinful behaviors such as: unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, hatred of God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, ruthlessness, and faithfulness. Using the same logic as the Working Group, since Paul was really trying to emphasize that all people are sinners and idolatry is wrong, therefore murder is no longer a sin, covetousness is no longer a sin, and deceit is no longer a sin. In fact, they are virtues approved by God! Yikes. On what basis do they extract same-gender behavior from its biblical context in a vice list and suddenly baptise it as a virtue? The biblical command to love? This hermeneutic is in major need of revision.

my tracks.<sup>28</sup> Are we reading the same Bible? Rom 1 **IS** a polemic against idolatry and sin generally, but we never hear anyone arguing that Paul doesn't care about murder or slander because his "focus is really on idolatry." This move can only be achieved with regard to Paul's teaching on homosexuality through a sophisticated but highly problematic exegetical slight of hand.

An overview of all Jewish and Christian sources in antiquity reveals that no Jewish or Christian writer ever affirms any kind of homosexual behavior. Homosexual practice, along with bestiality, adultery, incest, and sex outside of heterosexual marriage are completely rejected as out of step with God's design and desire for human sexuality and human flourishing.

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<sup>28</sup> Robyn Whitaker, "Same-sex marriage: What does the Bible really have to say?" ABC Opinion. Online: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-23/same-sex-marriage-what-bible-has-to-say-robyn-whitaker/8831826>. Accessed Oct 29th 2018. Whitaker makes the claim that we need to put the biblical verses that talk about same-gender issues in perspective. She notes there are only six verses out of more than 31, 000 in the Bible that address the topic. This, she notes, is a mere .016 percent of the Bible. On the basis of this she concludes that "monitoring and proscribing" human sexual activity, including homosexual activity is "not a particular concern of the Bible." She compares this with 2000 verses on the issues of greed and money, and 100 verses focusing on care for widows. World-renowned ethicist David Gushee makes a similar argument [David P. Gushee, *Changing our Minds* (Canton, Mich: Read the Spirit Books, 2017)]. He writes: "If we take the most commonly cited texts on the issue [homosexual practice] from the traditionalist side, they are derived from 11 of the 1, 189 chapters in the Bible," 56. Yet, this sort of argumentation is really just a red herring. First, there are far more verses total that deal with *porneia* ("sexual immorality") and not homosexual practice (or the words used to express homosexual practice) in specific in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Whitaker does not include these, and thus, the statistic is misleading. Second, coming to a theological conclusion on the basis of a lexical (word usage) statistic is not a recognised or legitimate way of making a serious or convincing theological claim. Lastly, no-one is suggesting that we should *only* be talking about sexual ethics. No-one is arguing that we should *exclude or diminish* issues of justice in regard to widows, orphans, or the poor. Certainly, no one is claiming that greed is a virtue. My argument is that the Bible cares about all of these things (and more)! And so should we.

Even the claim that Jesus never spoke about gay marriage shows itself to be only a surface level argument. In prohibiting *porneia*, sexual immorality, in Mk. 7:21–23, Jesus would certainly be including in this statement all sexual behavior that did not accord with the inherited Jewish view, including consensual homosexual acts.<sup>29</sup> In any case, since Jesus does not speak of incest or bestiality directly—does this mean he secretly affirmed them?<sup>30</sup>

I will NEVER turn my back on a gay Christian simply because they are gay. I will NEVER look down on them and never act as though my life is perfect and beyond critique. I will also never lie to them. The Bible does address this issue and it presents a hard teaching, but one that is ultimately the path to lasting human fulfillment and faithful cross-bearing discipleship. To keep that truth from them would be the truly unloving

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 88 shows that the Second Temple Jewish texts of Jubilees and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs link the word *porneia* [“sexual immorality” in most translations] with the sin of Sodom. In Jubilees 16:5–6, the men of Sodom are ‘cruel and great sinners and they were polluting themselves and they were fornicating [porneuō] in their flesh and they were causing pollution upon the earth . . .’ Cf. T. Levi 14:6: **“your mixing will be like Sodom and Gomorrah in ungodliness”**; T. Benj. 9:1 “you will commit fornication with the **fornication [porneia] of Sodom**”; T. Naph 3:4: “But you will not be so, my children, **recognizing** in the firmament, in the earth, and in the sea, and **in all created things, the Lord who made all things, that you not become like Sodom, which changed the order of their nature.**” Notice that the polemic in these verses is not confined to homosexual rape; it is extended to a polemic against the perceived unnatural “exchange of order” and “mixing” that describes homosexual practice. Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.273–275 (in Gagnon, 166–67): **“sexual intercourse with males is contrary to nature (para physin) and without restraint . . . [and the Greeks attribute] to the gods sexual intercourse between males’ [and the Greeks have thereby invented] an excuse for their pleasures which were disgusting and contrary to nature (para physin).”** Cf. Philo, *On The Life of Abraham* 135–37; *Special Laws* 1.325; 2.50, 3.37–42; *On the Contemplative Life*, 59–62. Lastly, Gagnon helpfully shows that the argument that homosexual practice was against nature can also be found in many places in non-Jewish Greco-Roman literature such as Plato, *Laws*, 636C: “When male unites with female for procreation, the pleasure experienced is held to be in accordance with nature (kata physin), but contrary to nature (para physin) when male mates with male or female with female,” 164–165. Cf. Plutarch’s *Dialogue on Love* 751 D–E.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 289.

thing. To give it to them presents a burden, but one that I am committed to bearing with them as a brother in Christ.

## Theology of Marriage

When Jesus cites Genesis 1–2 in his teaching on marriage between one man and one woman in Mark 10:2–12, he is taking up the universally held Jewish belief that sexual expression must be in accord with nature.<sup>31</sup> It was the consensus view among the Jews and early Christians, and it is the consensus view in contemporary global Christianity today by far. If the Jewish faith prohibited same-gender sexual activity across the board, it is highly improbable that Jesus, a Jew, would have been open to same-gender marriage. According to Jesus, *porneia*, sexual immorality was a ground for **divorce**; **not** the basis of an acceptable marriage.<sup>32</sup> Even the Working group acknowledges this stating that “As a Jew, Paul is not in favour of same gender relations.”<sup>33</sup>

“But the Bible used to allow polygamy! This proves that marriage can change over time.” Yes, but God never condones or celebrates polygamy. The biblical witness describes the sinful situation and cultural setting of the ancient near east; it doesn’t prescribe polygamy as a suitable sanctified option. Scripture does not present a multitude of alternate marriage arrangements; it does not present a plethora of possibilities. Biblical marriage does not offer a ‘unity in diversity’; it commands ‘unity in heterosexual monogamy.’

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<sup>31</sup> This view is expressed in every Jewish text available to us. By seeking to redefine marriage we not only walk apart from Scripture; we walk apart from the communion of the saints across the ages.

<sup>32</sup> Mt. 19:9

<sup>33</sup> Working Group Report, 30.

“Ok, so maybe the polygamy argument isn’t spot on. But wasn’t Paul talking about exploitative sexual activity, and not consensual same-gender activity?” It is often claimed that Paul was only arguing against pederasty, a practice in which grown men of a higher class had sexual relations with younger boys of a lower social class. It is definitely true that Paul would have been opposed to pederasty, and that pederasty is distinct from consensual gay relationships. No doubt. However, this argument ignores a few key elements in Paul’s thought. Paul, the Jews, the Stoics, and even Plato argue that homosexual practice itself—regardless of the particular context or type—is **contrary to nature**.<sup>34</sup> This would have of course included homosexual relationships that were sexually exploitative or involved prostitution; **but it is not limited to these scenarios**. The Working Group recognises and confirms that Paul’s argument in Rom. 1:27 was not limited to exploitative situations like pederasty, and in fact, included

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 88 shows that the Second Temple Jewish texts of Jubilees and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs link the word porneia [“sexual immorality” in most translations] with the sin of Sodom. In Jubilees 16:5–6, the men of Sodom are ‘cruel and great sinners and they were polluting themselves and they were fornicating [porneuō] in their flesh and they were causing pollution upon the earth . . .’ Cf. T. Levi 14:6: **“your mixing will be like Sodom and Gomorrah in ungodliness”**; T. Benj. 9:1 “you will commit fornication with the **fornication [porneia] of Sodom**”; T. Naph 3:4: “But you will not be so, my children, **recognizing** in the firmament, in the earth, and in the sea, and **in all created things, the Lord who made all things, that you not become like Sodom, which changed the order of their nature.**” Notice that the polemic in these verses is not confined to homosexual rape; it is extended to a polemic against the perceived unnatural “exchange of order” and “mixing” that describes homosexual practice. Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.273–275 (in Gagnon, 166–67): **“sexual intercourse with males is contrary to nature (para physin) and without restraint . . . [and the Greeks attribute] to the gods sexual intercourse between males’ [and the Greeks have thereby invented] an excuse for their pleasures which were disgusting and contrary to nature (para physin).”** Cf. Philo, *On The Life of Abraham* 135–37; *Special Laws* 1.325; 2.50, 3.37–42; *On the Contemplative Life*, 59–62. Lastly, Gagnon helpfully shows that the argument that homosexual practice was against nature can also be found in many places in non-Jewish Greco-Roman literature such as Plato, *Laws*, 636C: “When male unites with female for procreation, the pleasure experienced is held to be in accordance with nature (kata physin), but contrary to nature (para physin) when male mates with male or female with female,” 164–165. Cf. Plutarch’s *Dialogue on Love* 751 D–E.

relationships in which people had passion for one another.<sup>35</sup> This is in line with what we learn from the Jewish Rabbis of the 2nd century who likewise do not restrict the biblical texts on homosexuality to pederasty but also include relationships between two consenting adults.<sup>36</sup> Lastly, if Paul had intended to restrict his comments to pederasty why wouldn't have he used the technical term readily available to him *paiderastes* which literally means "pederasty"?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Uniting Church in Australia. *B23 Assembly Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*. 2018, 30: "Some scholars have suggested that Paul's concern is only with the sexual exploitation involved in pederasty but, while Paul doubtless includes this, *he also refers to people having passion for one another*. Other scholars suggest that despite all that Paul says about 'orientation', his primary concern is only with same-gender sexual acts . . . As a Jew, Paul is not in favour of same-gender sexual relations." Notice that individuals sharing a passion for one another suggests that this is not simply a case of pederastic exploitative homosexual practice. Rather, reciprocal nature of the shared desire between the sexual partners here points to consensual adult homosexual relationships.

<sup>36</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 316 notes that in the Rabbinic commentary on homosexual practice the passive partner may be an adult or a minor, and thus the passive partner was not "restricted to" pederastic situation.

<sup>37</sup> Cf Didache 2:2 "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not corrupt children [paidophthorēseis]; you shall not be sexually immoral [porneuseis]; you shall not steal; you shall not practice magic; you shall not engage in sorcery; you shall not abort a child or commit infanticide. You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions." Cf. Barn. 19:4 "You shall not be sexually promiscuous [ou porneuseis]; you shall not commit adultery [ou moicheuseis] ; you shall not corrupt children [ou paidophthorēseis]. The word of God shall not go forth from you among any who are unclean. You shall not show partiality when reproofing someone for a transgression. Be humble; be quiet; be one who reveres the words that you have heard. You shall not hold a grudge against your brother or sister.—Notice that in these early Christian works the authors use the term which existed for pederasty in antiquity, *paidophthoros* or *paidophthoreō* which literally translates "child molestation." The biblical authors use entirely different terms when they talk about homosexuality. They use the terms *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs*, which refer to the active and passive partners in male homosexual intercourse. If the biblical authors had wanted to restrict their polemic about homosexuality to pederasty, they would have used the *paidophthoros* or *paidophthoreō* **not** *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs*. The New Testament author and the Second Temple Jewish communities rejected homosexual practice in all of its forms on the basis that it is contrary to nature.

“Ok, so maybe the polygamy and pederasty objections fall short of overturning the historic traditional consensus view on marriage. But, still, our experience of loving, gay and lesbian couples shows us that these arrangements can be life-giving and beautiful.” No doubt! I am friends with several same-gender, married couples. I’m not questioning their character or ability to live a virtuous life as a same-gender couple. And they are free to do that under the civil law. The question remains, however: should our *experience* be able to overturn the biblical arguments against same-gender relationships? I’ve had many people point to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral which holds: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as the basis of theology.<sup>38</sup> However, if you ask Albert Outler, the theologian who created the term “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” it is clear that **Scripture was always primary for Wesley**. When disagreements over an interpretation arose, Wesley would appeal to the teachings of the early church for clarity. Tradition, Reason, and Experience were considered interpretive aids to Scripture, *not* competing sources of revelation or truth. Outler notes that for Wesley **experience added “nothing to the substance of Christian truth.”**<sup>39</sup> Instead, the role of experience was to move the truths of the Bible **from the head to the heart**.

Often it is claimed that prohibiting same-gender marriages will doom gay and lesbian people to lives of loneliness and solitude. Yet, a 2014 Pew Report estimated that “by the time today's young adults reach the age of 50, about one in four of them will have never

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<sup>38</sup> The Wesleyan stream is a major part of Uniting’s heritage, and so this seems like a great place to start to discover the role of experience for theology.

<sup>39</sup> Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. 20.1. 1985: 7–18.

married.”<sup>40</sup> Presumably, a good portion of these people will desire to be married but never find a suitable partner. Are these people doomed to an unfulfilled life, just because they are not married? Perhaps what is needed is not only a discussion about marriage, but a larger discussion about how belonging to the Church means belonging to a vitally connected spiritual family. In this family if you hurt, I hurt. If I loose, you loose. Your burdens are mine; and mine are yours. In baptism we died to the individualistic pursuit of happiness and we exist now as integrated co-communicants of grace. What God has joined together; let no-one separate. The true escape from loneliness rests not in a revision of the church’s doctrine on marriage but in a revolution of the church’s self-understanding as the family of God and the one body of Christ.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-26/more-people-than-ever-are-single-and-thats-a-good-thing/8473398>

## Catholicity and the ‘Substance of the Faith’

In their report, the Working Group has concluded that “the prohibitions on same-gender sexual activity contained within the Bible are not central to the Christian faith . . . [and therefore] . . . the church’s teaching on marriage is not part of the substance of the faith.”<sup>41</sup> Many of us have rejected that conclusion. We’ve rejected it, not only because we find it to be incompatible with Scripture, but because it runs ahead of and contrary to the ancient and contemporary consensus of the church catholic. Those of us who consider the received doctrine of marriage to be vital to the life of the church represent the **catholic consensus of contemporary Christianity**.<sup>42</sup>

A key assumption of the Working Group is that “the substance of the faith” refers only to the core doctrines of the gospel. These can be found in the Creeds which exist to “declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith” according to the Basis of

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<sup>41</sup> Uniting Church in Australia. *B23 Assembly Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*. 2018, 49–50.

<sup>42</sup> Contra Andrew Dutney’s opinion that “the “vital to the life of the Church” trigger would simply commit the church to a period of intense, divisive, probably hurtful debate on something which, in all honesty, isn’t actually ‘vital’.” <https://andrewfdutney.wordpress.com/2018/08/07/matters-vital-to-the-life-of-the-church/>

Union.<sup>43</sup> Since marriage is not addressed in the Creeds, for the Working Group and others, it cannot be considered a part of the substance of the faith.<sup>44</sup>

I agree, of course, that marriage is not part of the Creeds. However, I strongly disagree that this makes issues of ethics and morality secondary issues about which we can agree to disagree.

If we consult Scripture we do not find that doctrine and ethics are separated into such neat and distinct categories. The “faith once delivered to the saints” which is mentioned in Jude 3 has to do with both theology *and* ethics. And this faith is contained in the apostolic witness of Scripture, the Word of God written.

Scripture itself includes ethics in what the apostle’s refer to as “sound doctrine.” In 1 Tim 1:9–10, the author gives a list of vices that includes murder, sexual immorality, and homosexual practice.<sup>45</sup> He labels these behaviors as “contrary to sound doctrine.” Sound doctrine, he writes in the very next verse, is “in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God.” Likewise, in Titus 1:15–2:15, the author refers to people who are impure and defiled in their minds and conscience. He then contrasts this sinful

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<sup>43</sup> The Basis of Union (1992), paragraph 9.

<sup>44</sup> The Working Group considers the doctrine of marriage to be a secondary doctrines, similar to one’s preference for Calvinism or Arminianism, or one’s preferred theological explanation of the Eucharist. We don’t divide over these issues, they maintain, but we hold them in tension, recognizing that they are not the core, not the substance of the Gospel. This is evident in Dutney “Matters Vital to the Life of the Church” where he explains that the Working Group maintains that “the doctrine/s of marriage is not and has never been central to Christian doctrine.”

<sup>45</sup> Paul uses the same word found in Rom. 1:27 (*arsenokoites*) to refer to homosexual practice.

behavior with an exhortation to Christian leaders charging them to “teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” He then spends fifteen verses in a row describing the *ethics* of the Christian life. In verse 10, he directly relates these particular Christian behaviors with the Gospel, noting that the purpose of this pure moral life is “so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

That “sound doctrine” refers not only to the core elements of the Gospel but to a broader apostolic rule of faith in the Scriptures that includes ethics is held by the majority of scholarly commentators on the subject. J.N.D. Kelly explains that sound doctrine refers to “the authentic Christian message *applied to conduct*.”<sup>46</sup> William Mounce, refers to sound doctrine as the *conduct* of believers in conformity with the apostolic teaching.<sup>47</sup> Catholic commentator Benjamin Fiore argues that “sound teaching issues in *morally upright behavior*.”<sup>48</sup> Philip Towner argues that sound teaching refers to “**authoritative apostolic doctrine** [which when applied] to moral teaching . . . **described behavior or teaching that was virtuous**.” He concludes that “**sound teaching** . . . articulates *the appropriate ethical response to God*.”<sup>49</sup> The phrase was

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<sup>46</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (A & C Black: London, 1963), 60.

<sup>47</sup> William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*. WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 42.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Fiore, S.J., *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus*. Sacra Pagina 12 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>49</sup> Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 130. Cf. Robert W. Wall, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 70, who offers that orthodox instruction creates a sanctified “interior life” which is shaped by “healthy doctrine.”

part of a common medical metaphor used by popular Greco-Roman philosophers at the time of Paul to refer to opposing philosophical positions as “sick and diseased.”<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, the Working Group wants to live and work with “the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”<sup>51</sup> It commits to “seek continuity with the broad Christian tradition and unity in faith *and practice* in the present.”<sup>52</sup> It is evident to me, though, that the Working Group has unfortunately failed to achieve this goal in their proposal to accept same-gender marriage.

St. Vincent of Lerins, a 5th century monk developed a “test or orthodoxy” which can help us recalibrate. He developed this rule by surveying the way the early church dealt with doctrinal development when both sides appealed to Scripture. Vincent’s method was to only accept as valid teachings that can be shown to be the consensus of all Christians, in all places, at all times. He allowed for progress in doctrine provided that it did not offend against a teaching that had been believed by all Christians, at all times, in

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<sup>50</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 40 ff. Esteemed Greco-Roman expert and biblical scholar Abraham Malherbe—about as far from a fundamentalist as you can get—shows that sound doctrine is literally “healthy” doctrine.

<sup>51</sup> *Assembly Standing Committee Report*, 11. Though, strangely, on page 50 the report states: “Ministers must ‘live and work within the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in the Basis.” The phrase “as that way is described in the Basis” creates some ambiguity as to what the intention is by the author of that statement. It seems problematic to use the language of the early church from the Nicene Creed (“We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church”) but to reinterpret the meaning of those concepts through a later document. The claims to apostolicity, catholicity, holiness, and oneness *precede* the Basis of Union. The Basis of Union does not give these terms meaning; their meaning is antecedent to the Union by a long shot. Catholicity refers to the universal conciliar orthodox consensus at all times, in all places, by all, and apostolicity refers to the apostolic root of the teaching which we now have in the writings of the New Testament.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Emphasis mine.

all places.<sup>53</sup> This method cannot solve every theological conundrum that we face, but it is exceedingly useful in that it can safeguard the church from moving away from teachings that have exhibited an overwhelming consensus and agreement in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church through the ages. Unanimous agreement was not needed to pass the “test of orthodoxy.” Rather, a reasonably firm majority in all places, at all times, by all provided the necessary framework for orthodoxy. Vincent’s approach has been applied by many theologians throughout history to provide a framework for faithful doctrinal development and progress.<sup>54</sup> Same-gender marriage would not qualify for what the Scriptures refer to as “sound doctrine” or for what Vincent’s framework called “orthodoxy.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas G. Guarino, “Pope Francis Looks to St. Vincent of Lérins.” *First Things* (9.24.2013). Online: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/09/pope-francis-looks-to-st-vincent-of-lerins>. Guarino notes that some, including Joseph Ratzinger and Yves Conger have interpreted Vincent as being too rigid. Yet: “As Pope Francis points out, Vincent is not simply interested in preservation (although the monk of Lérins is a great defender of the apostolic tradition, endlessly citing St. Paul’s exhortation, “Guard the deposit, Timothy!”). Vincent is equally concerned that this tradition be allowed to grow and develop homogeneously and architectonically over the course of time.” Pope Francis compares this doctrinal growth in Vincent’s writings in comparison with “gradual development whereby a child becomes an adult.” He argues that “over the years there occurs a refinement, maturation, and ripening of Christian doctrine.”

<sup>54</sup> Guarino, “Pope Francis Looks to St. Vincent of Lérins”— “Vincent argues that **any doctrinal growth must be warranted by the entire Church, under the Holy Spirit**. He insists that Scripture itself is perfectly capable of settling every question; unfortunately, however, heretics obscure the Bible with their deceitful misinterpretations. To whom, then, may we turn for sure guidance when interpreting the Divine Word?”

<sup>55</sup> For a powerful overview of St. Vincent of Lerins and to see how his ‘test of orthodoxy’ can be applied to emerging Christian expressions see Jonathan Kristian Sharpe, *Faithful Reformation: The Importance of Apostolicity and Orthodox Consensus for Emerging Christian Expressions* (University of Pretoria: PhD Dissertation, 2018). For an excellent, widely available look at the test of orthodoxy see the quintessential work on “paleo-orthodoxy” [‘ancient orthodoxy’]: Thomas Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003).

## Closing Statement

**You both belong to and are committed scholars in the UCA. How comfortable are you that this denomination not only affirms your view about marriage as valid, but equally affirms the other?**

I think I would want to emphasize the transitory nature of this sort of a doctrinal both/and. Perhaps it is best to say that it represents the theological diversity that already exists in the Uniting Church. In most cases at the moment, the churches that are progressive already were progressive before the 2018 Assembly. This decision did not turn them into progressive churches. As a new arrival from the States, it is obvious that the UCA is very much like the United Methodist Church or the United Church of Christ. What is surprising is not that Uniting has chosen to walk this path, but that it has taken so long. We should note, too, that all of those denominations are in steep decline and have been for decades, just like the Uniting Church. The Episcopal Church has just released its 2017 stats which show a whopping 60% drop in average Sunday attendance between 2000 and 2017 and a 19% drop in baptized membership.<sup>56</sup> Doctrinal revision on this issue has historically not led to unity or church growth.<sup>57</sup>

I'm not uncomfortable with the diversity in the denomination, but I do not support the idea that there can be two completely opposite views on this for the long term. At the

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<sup>56</sup> <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2018/08/30/facing-more-episcopal-church-decline/>

<sup>57</sup> Within Global South Anglicanism—which is growing at an astounding rate—the bishops speak of The Episcopal Church's adoption of same-sex marriage as having “torn the fabric of the communion.”

end of the day, one of us will turn out being the view that is more faithful to God's intention. This is not an issue of indifference or shoulder shrugging apathy either. It is a matter vital to the life of the Church. To that end, I would say that I accept that there are those who disagree on this matter, but I wouldn't be able to co-pastor a church with them or sit under their authority as a pastor of my home church. I think that having two views brings more division than unity. I would encourage ministry agents to think very carefully about this and to lead boldly. The Christian consensus across the world and through the ages does not accept the revisionist view. I would exhort you to be very sure before you go along with every wind of new teaching that blows through the doctrinal air of the church. You will be judged for how you steward and shepherd God's flock, and you have been charged by Holy Scripture—the Word of God—to stand firm in the faith once delivered to the saints. If even one small part of you thinks that you may be in error, I strongly encourage you to err on the side of caution and wait to move positions until the catholic consensus of the global church indicates a universal catholic shift on this issue.

**Assuming you can stay within this church, what enables you to do so? Why are your different convictions about God's truth on this not a point of departure between you?**

I can stay, and I will stay. What enables me to stay is the trust I have that the dissonance of error will show itself clearly over time. As the truth continues to be upheld, the erroneous view will become apparent, causing discord and atonal friction over the

harmony of the consensus chorus of the communion of the saints. Ralph Winter, former Professor of Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary has written about how the church of the Middle Ages survived, not because of the holiness of the institutional structures, but because of the faithfulness of the missional communities, monasteries, and religious orders.<sup>58</sup> These groups acted as agents of refreshment, revitalization, and reformation as they banded together in their affinity groups and carried on within the church while transforming the institutional structure through faithful long obedience in the same direction. I believe this can and will happen, and is already happening, actually. I want to encourage like-minded evangelicals and orthodox believers in Uniting to keep banding together in affinity groups.<sup>59</sup> These need not necessarily be “non-geographical presbyteries”; but they could be. By the way, it seems a bit odd and suspect to me that the Uniting Church has no problem changing a 2000 year old teaching on marriage but does not think it can accommodate an ecclesiological change like a non-geographical presbytery. If we can have “unity in diversity” on something as personal, important, and divisive as marriage, surely we can figure out how to provide adequate, gracious, and appropriate pastoral oversight to a group that will only benefit from the mutual encouragement it will afford during this difficult season of ministry in the life of the Uniting Church.

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<sup>58</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission.” *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol 2. 1974: 121–139.

<sup>59</sup> Think of yourselves as the evangelical version of the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits within the Uniting Church. Your mission is like those of the German Pietists who revitalized Lutheranism and the Wesleyan Methodists who introduced evangelical revivalism into status quo mainline Anglicanism.

Faithfulness is not running away from the brokenness; faithfulness is running toward it. Faithfulness and Gospel hope is the ability to look at this denomination in its current state of chaotic decline and division, and view it not as it is in its present brokenness but as it will be in its future blessedness.

In Christ,

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October 31st, 2018