



# REDEFINING MARRIAGE?

## What does the Presbyterian Church think about same-sex-marriage?

Only a few decades ago homosexuality was illegal in every state of Australia. Men were arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned for homosexual activity. It was the “love that dare not speak its name”. As I was growing up, being ‘gay’ was a smutty play ground insult (though we used cruder words than that). This has changed almost completely, and so quickly!

The gay rights movement in Australia began to organise in the late 1960s. In 1972, South Australia was the first State to give decriminalise some homosexual acts. Over the next three decades all Australian states came to treat homosexual and heterosexual acts in the same way under the law. Legislation gave same-sex relationships the same status as heterosexual *de facto* relationships in areas of tax, superannuation, health insurance and social security. In most states same-sex couples may adopt children and access artificial fertility treatment. Federal and state anti-discrimination legislation protects people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.



Since the 1970s the gay community became visible (and ‘gay’) and is now a major cultural force. Homosexuality is not only accepted but even celebrated. Ian Thorpe’s “coming out” in July 2014 was perhaps the most high profile in recent years. Kerryn Phelps, the former president of the AMA (and, herself, well and properly ‘out’), noted that the fuss about Thorpe’s announcement showed that “coming out is still a big deal”. Nevertheless, his eventual admission that he is gay was welcomed and even lauded.

All of those changes have led to the point where same-sex-marriage is a hot political issue. (As I’ll explain later I don’t think that so-called same-sex marriage is genuinely a kind of marriage, however “so-called same-sex marriage” is a clumsy term. Instead I will refer to same-sex-marriage). Since 2009 same-sex-marriage has been introduced in Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and 37 states of

the U.S.A. Attempts have been made to introduce it in NSW and Tasmania. In the ACT legislation operated for only a few days in late 2013 before it was declared invalid by the High Court on the basis that the Constitution puts marriage under federal law. A bill for same-sex-marriage has been introduced to federal parliament by Liberal Democratic Senator David Leyonhjelm (The Freedom to Marry Bill 2014). Presumably the Parliament will consider it this year. Surveys suggest that between two thirds and three quarters of the Australian population support the introduction of same sex marriage. While there is significant resistance to same-sex-marriage in the Federal Parliament, the pressure to its acceptance will be strong and the outcome of the political process is unpredictable.

## Same-sex marriage laws by state

The U.S. Supreme Court will hear challenges to California's gay marriage ban and to the federal law known as the Defense of Marriage Act (no state is required to recognize a same-sex marriage from another state). The status of same-sex marriage laws by state:



In just a few decades homosexuality has become a major theme in Australian culture. What used to be vilified and mocked is accepted and even promoted. What I sniggered about in the playground is a big social issues for my children. The story of this change is regularly told as one of enlightenment and liberation. For Christians it is often seen as a course of moral decline. I don't want to pursue either of those lines, but simply to notice that there has been a huge change.

This leaflet is written to help Christians, and specially members of the Presbyterian Church of Australia to think about same-sex marriage and how Christians respond. In 2013, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia stated its opposition to same-sex marriage. This leaflet will show you some reasons why the church has done this and help you think about the issue. It is important to see that the question of marriage is the current political pressure point from a huge change in attitudes about homosexuality in Australian society. When you look at the history, it is no wonder that the issue has become the hot point.

*Resolution of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, September 2013.***DECLARATION:**

*We, the Commissioners of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia here assembled declare:*

*1. that the true definition of Marriage is found in God's Word when it reports Him as saying: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." [Genesis 2:24]. It is the lifelong union of one man with one woman, voluntarily entered into, excluding all others.*

*2. that the purposes of marriage in God's design are lifelong companionship, social stability and the natural procreation and nurturing of children [Genesis 2:18, Ecclesiastes 4:9-11; Deuteronomy 6:1-7, Ephesians 6:1-4; Proverbs 14:1, Psalm 127 & 128].*

*3. that despite any actions by human governments so called "same-sex marriage" will never be truly marriage.*

*4. that the introduction of so called "same-sex marriage" will not contribute to the good of society but will reduce the respect in which marriage is held and further legitimise the procurement of children for same sex couples when a child should, as far as possible, have a mother and father.*

*5. that the introduction of so called "same-sex marriage" will be very likely to encroach on freedom of religion in Australia since it will become increasingly unacceptable to speak against homosexual behaviour.*

*6. that God condemns homosexual behaviour along with all forms of sin and provides forgiveness of and redemption from all sin through Christ and commissions his church to proclaim this message to all people.*

*7. that all Christians struggle with various sins throughout their lives and depend on God's help, including the support of fellow Christians, to serve Christ faithfully; so Christians who experience same sex attraction should receive compassionate support from fellow believers as they seek to live faithfully either as celibate or in marriage as God has designed it.*

*Therefore the Assembly*

*1. calls on all governments in Australia to refrain from any legislation to introduce so called "same-sex marriage"*

*2. calls on all members to oppose the introduction of any legislation for so called "same-sex marriage"*

*3. calls on members to communicate the redemption found in Christ to every section of the community*

*4. calls on members to offer compassionate support to fellow Christians who experience same sex attraction as they seek to live faithfully either as celibate or in marriage as God has designed it.*

### *Thinking from the gospel*

For Christians, the gospel must set our perspective on the discussion of same-sex-marriage. That might be a surprise. The gospel is about how Jesus saves us by his death and resurrection, does it really contribute to the same sex marriage debate?

The gospel has a wide scope. Sin has not only ruined our relationship with God. When humanity turned away from God our relationships, our society and even our physical world were all ruined. The creation has been “subjected to frustration” and put in “bondage to decay” (Rom 8:20–21). When Adam turned away from the God, the whole world that he was meant to rule over went wrong. As God redeems his people he is redeeming the lost world, bringing it back to what it should be and making it into what it could have been. That means that the gospel is about God saving people and gathering them in his own community (the church) and fixing up his world.

When Paul writes to the Corinthian church their own behaviour and engaging with the world beyond the church, he shows us how the gospel guides our response to issues like same sex marriage.

### *A good world gone wrong*

The gospel tells us some key things about our world. If God is “fixing” things, there must be something wrong. Better than any of us, God knows that things are wrong. Twice in the gospels we are told that Jesus weeps — at the tomb of Lazarus and as he looks at the city of Jerusalem (John 11:35; Luke 19:41). Jesus’ tears show that things are deeply wrong; humanity is ruled by death and refuses to turn to God. The reason that Jesus’ followers mourn (Matthew 5:4) is that when they see things his way there is so much that is heart-breaking.

If things are wrong and they are being redeemed then this implies that there must be some way they should be. There must be a base line, some kind of design plan that sets the proper pattern for life. There is, and it comes from God. He made the world and us and he has a design for how things should be. So one of the implications of the gospel is that God has a pattern built into the world he has made.

God’s created order and its corruption are the first important perspective for thinking about marriage. The Bible says that sex is God’s good gift to be celebrated and enjoyed in the setting of marriage. When God instituted marriage and blessed it, he gave a complex gift which weaves together companionship, sex and children. Marriage is the most intimate and intense human relationship and it is sealed by sexual expression. Sexual union is no merely physical act — it has profound emotional and spiritual depth. It creates a bond which helps secure the foundation for family life. What’s more, the sexual relationship which binds married intimacy is also how children are conceived.



This is why I am referring to same-sex-marriage. Marriage is God's design, and it is a life-long commitment of a man and a woman to live with and love each other. That is the definition of marriage, and humans are not free to simply redefine. So what is called "same sex" marriage or gay marriage is not marriage.

This three-fold interweaving does not mean that married couples must aim to conceive every time they have sexual intercourse or that contraception is wrong on principle. It certainly doesn't mean that couples who are unable to have children have second rate marriages. It does mean that sex and children are meant to go together in marriage. Sexual relationships outside that pattern are outside God's design and are wrong.

Because God has a pattern of how sexuality is to be expressed, he condemns adultery, pre-marital sex, prostitution, incest, rape and homosexuality. Each of these, in one way or another, breaks God's pattern. 1 Corinthians 6 lists some of the ways in which human life is corrupted by sin in the areas of worship, possessions, substances, words and relationships (vv9-10). Sexual sins make the list, including homosexuality. It is not that homosexuality is the one great sin or even that sin is all about sex. People who are tempted to homosexuality are not particularly evil. Some people are inclined to heterosexual sin, some are tempted to steal or get drunk or to slander others. Paul says that acting on any of those temptations is sin. Homosexuality, along with a range of other actions, is outside of God's created pattern.

The idea of God setting a pattern for sexuality marks the huge gap between how Christians think about sex and common Australian assumptions. Most Australians hold that as long as no one is hurt, you are free to conduct your sexual activities as you wish. Announcing that pre-marital sex or homosexuality are wrong sounds like prudish judgementalism. Christians hold that God has a pattern and he says what is right and wrong. When we break his pattern people do, in fact, get hurt. Even when there is no obvious victim, sexual sin is still wrong.

This difference explains why the same-sex-marriage debate is so frustrating for Christians (and no doubt why we frustrate other people). We are operating from a different set of assumptions about how we determine right and wrong. Christians have to remember that we are counter-cultural, we don't expect the rest of society to agree with God's patterns.

### *The gospel and putting wrongs right*

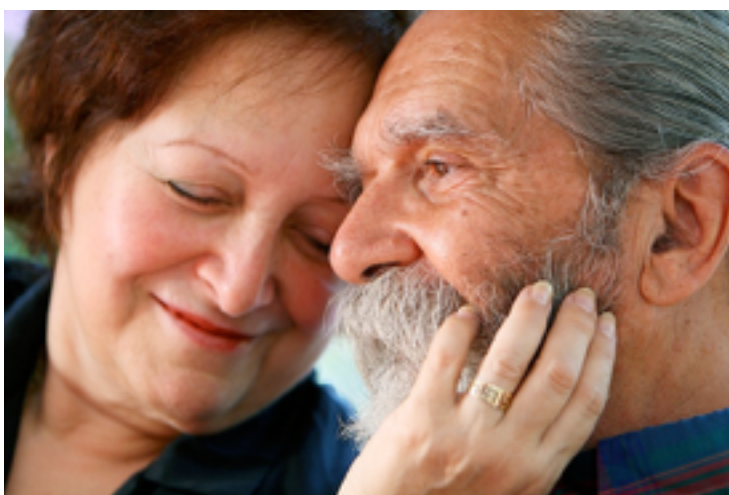
The gospel is not simply about how things have gone wrong. That is simply the background. The gospel announces that God is fixing things up. Jesus, God-incarnate, has come to our world to live and die and rise again. The redemption of the world is secured by God through the work of Jesus. One of the implications of this is that we can't fix things up ourselves. The gospel is not about self-improvement, or us all working together. It promises something better: God does the fixing.

God's promise is partly about the future — that his people will "inherit" his kingdom (1 Cor 6:10). That is, those who come to be his through trust in Christ will share in the blessing and glory that will come when God rules all things perfectly. That hope, based in Jesus' resurrection and focussed on his return is the full and final answer for all that is wrong in God's world.

The gospel is also about what God is doing now. Between the time of Jesus' resurrection and his return, the Spirit of God is at work in our world. He gathers people to worship Jesus together and he continues the work of fixing the world by changing them. So, by God's Spirit, the church is a reflection of how things should be and will be. That is one of the big points of 1 Corinthians 6. Paul uses a series of words to describe the change. Christians have been washed clean (symbolized in their baptism), sanctified (that is set apart for God) and justified (that is put right and accepted by God). They have a new identity and a new life "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God". After the list of sinful activities, Paul says "that is what some of you were" (v11). Notice the past tense. They were living sinful lifestyles, but what God has done for them in Christ has changed them. It is not that Christians are free from all sin, but we have had a fundamental change of direction so we now live for God. Some of the Corinthians were obviously living against God and in outright rejection of his way, now they have been changed and that change includes their sexuality.

The change which God brings in our lives means that how we live matters. The Corinthian church was inclined to think that Christian living was no big deal. They probably assumed that God is interested in 'spirits', not bodies; so what they did with their bodies was irrelevant to God. Paul is probably quoting their saying when he says: "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food—but God will destroy them both" (1 Cor 6:13a). If this was their slogan, then they likely meant that what you eat is irrelevant to being a Christian. It will all disappear in the end. And they applied the same logic to sex — do what you like it doesn't count for anything eternally.

Paul's reply is that the body is not just for food, but for the Lord (1 Cor 6:13b). In case they weren't clear that this includes sexual activity Paul says "the body is not meant for sexual immorality". In Corinth, a city with a wild reputation, the church was called to reflect God's kingdom with the bodies and in their behaviour. They were to stand out as people who lived differently.



*Inside the church*

God's work of salvation creates the church to be the community which lives God's way, no matter how the surrounding society acts. This has a very important implication for all debates about 'moral issues' and certainly for thinking about sexuality and homosexuality.

It means that the most important thing the church can do is to live faithfully to God's pattern. Our major concern is not how people around us behave, but how we live as a church. As our society has moved further from God's pattern in any area — as it has with sex — we need to be increasingly discerning about how Christians are meant to live.

We have to be counter-cultural in our sex life. Single Christians can show that sex is not a short cut to fun or friendship. It is too precious and powerful for that. Christians with same-sex attraction are called to resist it and to build friendships and love on God's pattern. In a society in which marriage is often dispensable, married Christians need to strive for stable, faithful, loving marriages. Living differently in these areas will be a community calling, we need to encourage and support each other to be faithful. Christians will face sexual temptation and God makes no promise that they will be freed from those in this life. He does promise to provide for us and lead us through. We need to be able to admit to each other our struggles and failings. We have to assure each other of God's forgiveness and remind each other that we are no longer what we were. (We need to do the same thing with money and possession which we probably find far harder).



Christians who are sexually attracted to people of the same sex often find themselves in a very difficult situation. While the surrounding society sees no problem at all with their desires, the church can make them feel deeply ashamed. They may be struggling to work out their sexual identity and not be sure where to find friendship. Simplistic answers from Christians about how to overcome temptation just make things worse. The increased profile of homosexuality has made these struggles more obvious and, probably, more common. Churches need to be highly sensitive to the struggles of same-sex attraction and questions about gender identity. Our first reaction must be grace and encouragement and the promises of the gospel, not shock or condemnation.

In the context of gracious ministry, there is a place for a more firm discipline. Paul knew that the Corinthian church allowed, and even protected, a shocking immorality: one of the men in the church has a sexual relationship with his step mother (1 Cor 5:1). What is worse, the church was proud of its inclusiveness rather than grieving over the sin (1 Cor 5:2). Paul is appalled. There is nothing in the situation of which they should be proud. Rather than congratulating themselves on their inclusiveness, this sin should be a matter of grief. They should discipline this “brother” and try to bring him to his right mind. He was not to remain as part of the church while he lived that way (1 Cor 5:3-5). Persistent, unrepentant sin calls for a response from the church.

When the elders of a Presbyterian Church are aware of someone whose life (including their sexual behaviour) consistently denies God’s pattern, they should raise it with the person and deal with the sin. This is not to hurt the person, but with the hope that God will use the discipline to bring the person back to him. Every Christian needs the challenge and encouragement of other believers. If, in the end, the person will not repent of sin, then they should to be removed from the church. This should be the case for all ongoing obstinate sin. It doesn’t apply only to sexual sin or homosexuality; but it should apply to them as well.

How our lives reflects God’s work matters, and it should matter to the church (1 Cor 5:11). Both the Church of Scotland and the mainstream Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) have moved to allow for the ordination of practicing homosexuals. Those moves fly in the face of what the Bible says. They certainly do not fit with Paul’s attitude in 1 Corinthians 5.

### *Outside the church*

The case of people outside the church is quite different. It is not that God does not care about how they live or that his pattern and laws apply only in the church. It is clear that all people are accountable to God. “God will judge those outside” (1 Cor 5:13 cf Ro 2:16; 2Ti 4:1; 1Pe 4:5). But it is God who will judge the whole world, that is not the churches role. We are to discipline ourselves, but we don’t discipline the society. Paul explains that his instruction “not to associate with sexually immoral people” was about those in the church. If the Corinthians tried to apply this to the wider world they would not be able to be part of that world at all (1 Cor 5:9-10). Yet they are called and sent to live in the world and to know and love their neighbours.

See how important this difference is? It’s not our job to try to correct all the sins in the community. We don’t have to campaign against every form of greed or try to force people to pray or to worship the true God. God’s call is for us to be a holy church in a sinful community; not to try to change the community directly. As we witness about Jesus and people join him and us, then they turn away from sin. That doesn’t mean that we do not challenge evil in society, but when we do it is a different role to what we do in the church.



### *So why do anything about marriage?*

Where does that leave us with marriage? Maybe we should just ignore the issue in society and just get on and live God's way. There are some good reasons why we should speak out, though we need to be very clear why we do so.

First, we'll do it because we love our fellow citizens and we want the best for them. Marriage is God's design and promoting same-sex-marriage will not bring blessing to our society. Changing marriage will affect society, families and children. It will embed and promote a rejection of God's design. We don't oppose same-sex-marriage in order to judge our neighbours. To the extent that we can promote something of God's pattern for human life, we do that, because it is the best way to live. We are not trying to discipline society. We don't think that we can or should get rid of sin in our society. Opposing same sex marriage will not produce or preserve a "Christian" society.

Second, we should say that same-sex-marriage is wrong as a witness to our society, and even as a witness against it. The definition of marriage in Australian law may end up changing. We may not be able to do much about that. However, we should tell our society that it is wrong. We mustn't make it sound as if homosexuality is the great sin or the only sin, but neither should we ignore the issue.

A third reason to speak against same-sex-marriage is that its introduction inevitably threatens religious freedom. Changes in the Marriage Act will, presumably, have safeguards to protect the freedom of church and minister. Yet, one way or another, there will be pressure for Christian ministers to celebrate same-sex-marriage. In England, the Church of England was prohibited from conducting same-sex-marriages by law. Within a few weeks of that legislation being approved, a gay couple announced they would begin court proceeding to have have that prohibition removed (though it is not clear that they have gone ahead with the case). The same kind of moves would probably be attempted in Australia. Before pressure came directly on clergy, Christians working in wedding venues or catering will be expected to help run same-sex weddings.

Moreover, the introduction of same-sex-marriage will make it harder for Christians to explain that God considers homosexuality sin. Already negative comments about homosexuality are often accused of being 'hate speech' and homophobic.

It is wise to do our best to resist the introduction of same-sex-marriage. In the course of the debate we can insist that it must be possible for us to express the Christian view, without it being immediately ruled unacceptable. The very way in which we participate in the debate can show that disagreement over such a sensitive topic can still be done with respect. And if same-sex-marriage is introduced, we need to alert legislators to the possible threats to religious freedoms.



### *The gospel and the marriage debate*

The gospel shows us how to think about the same sex marriage debate. There's no need to be embarrassed about our views that are based on God's pattern. We can speak out because we long to live God's way and reflect his character and by his grace we can see what is right, good and beautiful. We shouldn't cave in and conform to the popular views when they differ from God's. Even if people find our position old-fashioned and ludicrous, we have to do our best to explain it carefully.

The gospel means that we should seek to find ways to present God's view and to show the goodness of God's ways, without imagining that we are in a war to rescue our culture. It is important to remember that lots of people in gay and lesbian community, and the wider secular culture, see Bible believing Christians as judgemental, hateful and abusive. There may not be much we can do to change that view, since people see any opposition to homosexuality as homophobia; we can do our best not to needlessly reinforce the perception.

It might turn out that same-sex-marriage is introduced, and if it is then the church will have the same role in society we've always been meant to have: to be a counter-cultural witness to Christ. We're already quite different to many Australians when it comes to sex and marriage.

So the Presbyterian Church of Australia will continue to argue that same-sex marriage will make our society worse, not better. We'll say that there is nothing unfair in limiting marriage to heterosexual couples. And we'll try to convince our community and our legislators that it is better for children and families if we leave marriage the way it is.

*This leaflet was prepared by John McClean, lecturer at Christ College, for the Church and Nation Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. It is circulated by the committee. While it explains and defends the position of the church on same-sex-marriage, it has not been endorsed by the Assembly*