

# ‘Disgustingly Intolerant & Unconvincing Bigotry’

*After causing something of a stir last week with my post on atheism, I seem to have caused similar controversy by dipping my toe into the debate regarding the issue of the definition of marriage—currently the subject of a British government consultation on how (not whether) it should be redefined to include gay relationships. William has urged me to respond to this, and he’s right—*

## **We need to talk**

When I began this blog a couple of months ago I [explained](#) that one of the reasons that I am writing is for the sake of transparency. I wrote then:

*«for a long time — all my life! — I have stood with one foot in an evangelical missionary culture and the other foot in the predominantly secular culture of the contemporary English-speaking world. And I’m not sure I’ve ever quite managed to overcome the challenge of communicating in a way which makes sense to both cultures — which probably explains why so many of my non-Christian friends from university find me somewhat peculiar.»* So, I should be—and indeed am—glad that this small controversy has compelled me to consider my views and created opportunity to try and explain myself.

But this concerns more people than just me. According to [Operation World](#), there are more than 500 million (half a billion) evangelical Christians in the world. The [number](#) of gay people is a contentious issue that depends on how you count (do we mean gay attraction, orientation, behaviour or self-defined identity?) but regardless of the exact figures, both groups wield quite considerable influence in today’s world. So it is important that we try to understand each other.

I therefore am offering this post not merely to explain myself. Rather I hope that what I write will help make transparent the biblical Christian perspective on ‘gay marriage’ to those who feel sometimes that evangelical Christians are [from another planet](#). And I hope that what I write will better equip Christians to “be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear, having a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:15).

But first, some ground rules for the discussion.

## **We need to respect each other**

If we are to have a conversation then each party must have at least a basic degree of respect for the other.

If one is a Christian (I am), then this should be motivated by the knowledge that each of us, whatever our sexuality, is [made in the image of God](#), and therefore worthy not only of respect but love. It is also worth saying explicitly that the gay people I have known have in general been friendly and intelligent.

We need to begin by refusing to demonize each other.

But we need more than that.

## **We need to distinguish disagreement and intolerance**

To disagree with something someone says or does isn’t of itself intolerance. On the contrary, if there was no disagreement there would be no need for tolerance.

Further, as the famous [Tolerance Paradox](#) points out, unrestricted tolerance is not possible, whether or not it is desirable. This is evidenced in Boris Johnson's recent remark (intended I think without any irony) "London is one of the most tolerant cities in the world and intolerant of intolerance."

Now, I have written [before](#) that I am doubtful that secularism can ever co-exist comfortably with 'religion'. But, uncomfortable as this might be, here we all are, me with my Bible and you with whatever [worldview](#) you happen to have, and unless the pre-tribulation rapturists are right, no-one's going to be suddenly disappearing. So we need to learn how to peacefully disagree without becoming apathetic and passive.

So for example, we Christians must see that the disagreement we have on this issue with those who are unconvinced that the Bible offers a universally valid definition of marriage is understandable and quite different from the unacceptable intolerance of those who have, in distinct situations, threatened death to [the MP David Burrowes](#) and [a fourteen-year old American girl](#) for respectively speaking in defense of the current definition of marriage.

Now our use of terms like 'disagreement' in some cases, and 'intolerance' in others, actually reflects a moral judgment: 'disagreements' are legitimate and 'intolerance' is not. And this judgment is not always a simple one.

But if we are to make it (and in fact we must and already do), then:

### **We need to acknowledge that there is an objective morality**

This is also necessary if we are to believe in real human rights. As the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) points out, if we "take away this moral underpinning, language about human rights can become either a purely aspirational matter or something that is simply prescribed by authority". And given the eagerness of some (but [not all](#)) within the LGBT movement to use the language of human rights to argue for gay marriage, it seems that there is a generally shared belief in human rights.

As a Christian, I believe that this objective morality is grounded in the existence of a transcendent good God, witnessed to by biblical revelation (and the hand-carved ten commandments), and known in an instinctive but limited way ('conscience') by all humans (being made in the image of this God).

This might be—but probably isn't—the same as saying I believe in [natural law](#). As with everything, this depends on your precise definitions. The way the term is usually used suggests that if such a thing exists it can be recognised by reason alone. Which I reject—I think we need the witness of Scripture—and hence my lack of optimism that a secular society could ever agree on what constitutes 'morality'.

Thus if I were to say (as [Dr Saunders does](#)) that "Throughout history in virtually all cultures and faiths throughout the world, marriage has been held to be the union of one man and one woman", I would offer such an observation not as proof of that definition of marriage but merely evidence.

Clearly if we accept that such things as human rights and morality are real, then:

### **We need to see that there is such a thing as wrongdoing**

This is all the Bible means when it uses the word 'sin'. As we see in [this definition](#) from the book of James: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

Now sin is an unpopular word. And I have Christian friends zealous for the glory of God and eager to share the gospel who would say that we need to update our vocabulary because otherwise we will

unnecessarily confuse and alienate people. But sin is undeniably a word which the Bible has no qualms in using. So can the word be redeemed?

I believe it can. And that if we are going to become comfortable with the Bible we need to become comfortable with the word (though not with the activities that it describes). And to do that we need to understand how the Bible uses the word.

Which means:

### **We need to notice the breadth of the Bible's 'intolerance'**

Before we move on to discussing the specifics of the marriage debate, it's important to see that we Christians (or at least those of us who still do the good old street-preaching evangelism thing) are not trying to pick on gay people by pointing out their sins in particular. Our focus is much less specific than that.

A few quotations from Paul should demonstrate my point:

*«Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries and the like»*

(Galatians 5:19-21)

*«Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners...»*

(1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

*«God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting, being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful...»*

(Romans 1:28-31)

*«The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers...»*

(1 Timothy 1:9-10)

In all of these cases, Paul is not trying to emphasise any particular sin on the list over and against the others. His aim is rather to cover the whole wide range of types of wrongdoing that the biblical God refuses to tolerate.

The reason for this is simple:

### **We need to realise that each one of us is a moral failure**

Paul explains in [the third chapter of his letter to the Romans](#) that the reason he aggressively quotes the various activities forbidden by the biblical law is so "that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God", "for by the law is the knowledge of sin" by which we come to understand that "all have sinned and are falling short of the glory of God".

This is why it is not simply an intolerant bigoted power-play when Christians say that particular activities are ‘sins’, because to be a Christian a person needs to have recognised that they are in the category of ‘sinners’. From the point of view of a perfect God, being ‘undiscerning’ and ‘unmerciful’ are as bad as anything else on the list, be it sexual sin or ‘inventing evil things’.

So immediately after his brief list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul reminds them that “such were some of you”. But he’s equally willing to point the finger at himself. So in [1 Timothy 1:15](#) Paul writes “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am chief”.

If it still strikes us as strange, that Paul can boast almost shamelessly that he is ‘chief’ of sinners, while all the while condemning sin wherever he goes, then we will also doubtless find the suggestion that we should consider ourselves ‘moral failures’ rather repulsive. Hence:

### **We need to understand the relationship between sin and shame**

Robin (who I gladly count among my friends) [points out](#) that “in John 8:6 we see Jesus writing in the sand instead of joining the religious leaders in condemning the women for her sin”. He then concludes that “He was more concerned with her shame than with the law,” suggesting that shame is the real issue rather than sin.

But then what about Jesus’ closing words to the woman: “Go and sin no more”?

What about the fact that Jesus himself says very specifically that he came to call “sinners to repentance” (Mark 2:17)?

What about the fact that when Paul is writing to the Galatians he begins by reminding them of the gospel that “our Lord Jesus Christ...gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal.1:3,4; cf. 1 Cor.15:3) and immediately goes on to say that “if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (Gal.1:9) ?

From a biblical point of view, sin and shame are related as cause and effect. So, in Gen.2:25 before there has been any sin, we see that “the man and his wife were not ashamed”—but after they have been tempted and have disobeyed God they become ashamed and “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God”(Gen.3:8), instinctively knowing that the sin they had committed would incur a penalty.

The good news for shame-faced sinners is not that Jesus has been superficially unconcerned with our shame, but that through dying on the cross Jesus has radically dealt with the cause of our shame—that is, sin. And now in Jesus there is “forgiveness of sins” for “everyone who believes” (Acts 13:38-39).

This is the message: [Trust in Jesus!](#) And then all your sins will be forgiven. And thus your shame will be taken away. Hence you need no longer be ashamed of your moral failure, because you have a gospel in which you can be [unashamed](#).

This is true for gay people just as much as heterosexual people—just as it is true for women just as much as men, and for Gentiles just as much as Jews. But to trust a Jesus who claims to be a king and [is inviting people to be part of his kingdom](#) means to obey this Jesus.

Now, to be honest to obey Jesus you only need to know three things: the [First](#) and [Second](#) Great Commandments, and [the Great Commission](#).

But the Great Commission does include 'obeying all that Jesus commanded'. And if we are to obey Jesus on the subject of marriage:

### **We need to know the definition of marriage**

Hebrews 13:4 says that 'Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.' But simply to say that it is wrong to do anything 'sexually immoral' begs the question—what is sexually moral? Clearly the verse contrasts adultery and sexual immorality with keeping "the marriage bed pure" – but it assumes that we know the definition of 'marriage'. And this is precisely the issue which we must now address.

I have already said that I don't think that we can prove a definition of marriage on the basis of secular reason. The best we can hope for is to find a biblical definition and then see if the anthropological evidence corroborates the biblical witness. So: Is there a biblical definition of marriage?

Yes, there is—and in fact we find it in Jesus' own response to the Pharisees when asked about divorce.

Jesus takes his definition of marriage from Genesis: «Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female' (Genesis 1:27), and said 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24).»

So we have immediately and clearly the "one man and one woman" part the current definition of marriage ("the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others"), and the "union for life" part becomes apparent when we see that Jesus concludes from the fact that the two have "become one flesh" that divorce is not to be permitted.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that this definition of marriage 'discriminates' not only against gay couple couples but also against heterosexuals in a variety of modes: promiscuous, non-committal and polygamous.

But why did Jesus define marriage this way?

Now at one level, we simply have to be content to hold our hands up and admit that we don't know for sure. The Bible doesn't tell us. The secret things belong to the LORD our God... and all of that.

Nevertheless, not only are humans curious creatures (in both senses!) but trying to answer questions like this that are not explicitly revealed are a good way of testing whether we have understood the things that have been revealed. So:

### **We need a theology that makes sense of why marriage must be heterosexual**

If we were to speculate, what are the options as to why marriage must necessarily be heterosexual? I can think of two lines of approach: children and headship. The former being the Roman Catholic argument that marriage "forms the best atmosphere in which the children who result from their union can best be brought up". Indeed, even the gay Matthew Parris writes: "I am glad I had both a mother and a father, and that after childhood I was to spend my life among both men and women, and as men and women are not the same, I would have missed something if I had not learned first about the world from, and with, both a woman and a man, and in the love of both". But, as this writer notes, "the idea that marriage is solely for the procreation of children is easily dismissable" since "Plenty of straight couples, particularly older ones, do not marry to have children."

An alternative theological explanation could be forged around the biblical theme of husbandly headship. It would go something like this: marriage is a picture of the relationship between God and his people (Isaiah 54:5), ie. Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Christ is the head of the Church in a way analogous to the way “the head of a wife is her husband” (1 Cor.11:3). (It is important that we go with [the ESV’s translation](#) here as the Bible nowhere suggests a general submission of women to men, [as this writer points out](#)). Hence to reject the authority (headship) of God naturally leads to homosexuality (Rom.1:25-27). Further, this is grounded in the relationship of the Father and the Son within the Trinity, where both are equal in worth (Revelation 5:13), but in function it is the Father who is head (1 Cor.15:28).

One final thing before I open this up to the world:

### **We need to ask big questions**

One of the questions that is often assumed to be central to the issue of gay marriage is whether someone of homosexual orientation is [born this way](#). [Brendan O’Neil](#) notes the peculiar transition that has occurred in the last century

‘Once upon a time, conservatives and Christians argued that homosexuality was a genetic trait, while gay-rights activists insisted it was a lifestyle choice. Now, in an eye-swivelling turnaround, their arguments have reversed. Surely, this is the most comprehensive position swap in the history of culture wars?’

But rather than getting caught up too quickly in the disputed details of the questions everyone assumes are key, let’s remember at least occasionally to step back and gain perspective. Sometime it’s important to question the question.

So, for example, rather than running round in circles asking whether people are born gay or not, perhaps instead we should ask what it is that people are born for.

*What’s the purpose of human life?*

You probably know by know what I think the answer is. So instead of telling you what I think the answer is, I’ll tell you what I think it’s like when someone finds the answer: *It’s like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

---

**What do you think of the idea of redefining marriage? What do you think of what I’ve just said? Please let me know your thoughts—I welcome disagreement. But not [intolerance](#)!**

---

Some links:

If you’re interested in the question of how we can help evangelical Christians and LGBT people understand each other a little better, then [Andrew Marin](#) is a man who is probably doing the job as well as anyone out there.

If you’re a Christian and you’re interested in thinking more thoroughly about your theology of marriage, then you can’t do any better than [Christopher Ash’s ‘Marriage’](#).

If (but not [only if!](#)) you agree with Jesus’ definition of marriage you can [sign the Coalition for Marriage petition here](#).

If you’re interested in a thorough analysis of Jesus’ understanding of why it was necessary for him to focus on the problem of sin, I recommend [George Smeaton’s The Doctrine of the Atonement](#) which you can actually [download for free](#).

<http://peter.prescott.ws/blog/2012/04/disgustingly-intolerant-unconvincing-bigotry/>